ANNIHILATION

Isabel Ostrander

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BY
ISABEL OSTRANDER

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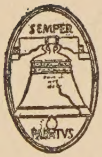

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ANNIHILATION

CHAPTER I

IN THE RAIN

A SEVEN-FIFTY derby, new only that afternoon and destined already to be reblocked! Ex-roundsman Timothy McCarty, whose complete transition to civilian attire was still so recent as to be a source of satisfaction to himself and of despair to his tailor and haberdasher, shrugged his broad shoulders and trudged sturdily along in the teeming downpour. A walk he had come out for, to clear his head of all that psycho-junk he'd been reading, and a walk he would have, but he could think of a place the devil could take this rain to, where it would be better appreciated!

Rain dripped down upon a sodden wisp of tobacco which hung dejectedly from beneath his mustache, and muddy streams spurted up almost to his knees with every step. It was a mean district, a neighborhood of broken, narrow sidewalks, dilapidated tenements and squalid wooden shacks, which became more squalid as McCarty neared the river, although here great warehouses loomed against the lesser darkness of the night sky. It was barely nine o'clock but there was scarcely a light in the streets, except where irregularly spaced street lamps emitted a blurred glimmer which emphasized rather than dispelled the murky gloom, yet McCarty strode on with the unconcern of one treading a once-familiar precinct.

He was not the only pedestrian abroad in the late September storm. Under the glow of a lamp he presently descried a dark figure proceeding also in the direction of the waterfront, and insensibly he quickened his own steps. Some peculiarity in the latter's gait had aroused that suspicion, more than mere curiosity, that had served him so well in the old days on the Force.

The man was lurching along at an unsteady pace, now breaking into a shambling trot for a few steps, now pulling up short, only to dive forward once more, reeling through the driving sheets of rain. McCarty followed closely. He had almost overtaken the man when a tall, bluecoated figure stepped suddenly from the shelter of a doorway and barred his progress.

"None of that, my lad! For what are you following that feller there—? Glory be, it's Mac!"

"True for you, Terry!" McCarty responded, as their hands met in a mighty grip. "A fine, conscientious bull you are, I'll say that for you, pinching the old has-been that got you on the Force, just because he's taking a bit of a stroll on a grand night like this!"

Officer Terrence Keenan grinned sheepishly in the darkness.

"It's a grand night, all right; for ducks!" he amended. "You're no has-been, Mac, from what the boys tell me of the different cases you've taken a hand in on the quiet since you resigned from the Department, but you needn't give me the laugh for looking you over just now! You know this neighborhood as well as me, and when I see a guy trailing a prosperous looking drunk towards the riverfront and the wharves it's up to me—"

"'Drunk,' is it?" McCarty demanded in fine scorn. Then he checked himself and added with a sweeping ges-

ture toward the greenish glow from twin lights across the street: "I was minded to take a stroll through my own old beat and drop in at the house over there for a word or two with you and the Lieutenant at the desk, when I saw the guy ahead—but where is he? He couldn't have got in one of the warehouses at this time of the evening and there's nothing else between here and the corner—?"

"Aw, let him go!" Officer Keenan interrupted good-naturedly. "Honest, Mac, I ain't got the heart to run them in these days, when the stuff is so hard to get, and all—!"

But McCarty was not listening. Forgotten alike were the bedraggled derby and the affluent private life of which it had so lately been sign and symbol; he was back on his old beat with something doing, and he grabbed his brother officer by the arm.

"What's that there beyond the lamp-post, half in and half out of the gutter? It's him, Terry, he's down!—Come on!"

Terry needed no second bidding now. Together they ran, splashing through puddles and over the loose, tilting fragments of pavement to where the man lay. He had pitched forward, his face hanging over the curb's edge, down into the swirling gutter. The back of his head showed a bald spot gleaming in the misty rays from the lamp.

"There's some heft to him!" Terry grunted. "Now I'll have to run him in for safe-keeping. What's that he's jabbering, Mac?"

Between them they had turned the prostrate man, who was breathing stertorously and muttering to himself in broken gasps. The young policeman's flashlight revealed

a heavy, smooth-shaven face, distorted and pasty gray beneath the rivulets of muddy water that coursed down it, with small, close-set eyes darting about in a wild, distended gaze.

McCarty bent lower in an effort to distinguish the hoarse accents. His companion commented disgustedly:

"He's worse than I thought he was! Look at the rolling eyes of him! It'll be Bellevue, I'm thinking—"

"Hush!" McCarty commanded, as he lifted the man's head higher on his knee. His breathing had become a series of heaving gasps now. Suddenly, with a rumbling snort, they ceased altogether, the flabby jaw sagging as the lids drooped.

"Not Bellevue, Terry; the morgue, more likely." McCarty spoke solemnly. "He's gone."

"Croaked!" Terry started up. "It sure looks like it! I'll run across to the house and tip off the lieut. and put in the ambulance call. You'll wait here?"

Without pausing for a reply he turned and splashed heavily across the street to the station house. McCarty looked down at the figure still propped against his knee. In the feeble light of the street lamp it appeared to be muffled to the neck in a loose, dark ulster of some thin material. The body was portly though not actually stout; the upturned face, washed clean of the mud from the gutter, was a grayish blur, its hideous distortion of feature relaxed, leaving it a mere flaccid mass. Some involuntary movement of the supporting knee caused the head to slump forward on the dead man's breast and once more that small, round bald spot gleamed whitely from the scant, dark hair surrounding it.

"Mike Taggart—he's lieutenant now, as you may know,—says it'll be all right to bring the body over there

without waiting out on such a night for the ambulance." Terry had waded back through the reeking mire. "He'd be glad of a word with you, too, Mac, so will you give me a hand with the old boy here? It's only a step."

With a slight shrug and a smile that was lost upon his companion McCarty assumed his share of their limp burden. Together they bore it across the street to the station house. He blinked in the sudden glare of light, as the sodden figure was deposited on the floor, and then turned to greet the homely, spruce young giant who had come forward from behind the desk.

"So it's Lieutenant Taggart now, that was a rookie when I left the Force!" he exclaimed with a laugh. "I'd thought to drop in on you one of these days but not as part of the escort for our friend here!"

He motioned over his shoulder toward the body and the lieutenant shook hands with obvious respect before advancing to examine it.

"Glad to see you, McCarty, though you do come in strange company!" He smiled and then turned to Officer Keenan who had knelt and was running his hands over the inanimate form in a practiced manner. "Humph! Looks like a pretty prosperous sort of a bird to be hanging around the waterfront on a night like this, don't he? What do you find on him, Terry? I don't believe I ever saw that face in this precinct before."

As the policeman turned over to his superior the contents of the dead man's pockets, McCarty stood gazing thoughtfully down upon him. He was apparently in the late forties and in life the beefy, extremely close-shaven face might have been florid; the nose was short but highly arched and the lids which had opened now revealed the

small, pale eyes set in a dull stare. His raincoat, of excellent texture, had been opened to admit of Terry's search, and disclosed a dark brown sack suit and tie of the same grade of conservative excellence as the outer garment, but the low brown shoes that covered the large, rather flat feet were as incongruously inferior as they were blatantly new. The man's hands were outstretched limply, palms upward, with the thick though well-kept fingers curling slightly, and McCarty's keen eyes narrowed a little as they rested on them. Then he turned.

"Lieutenant, I think I saw his hat go sailing off down the gutter as we carried him across. Shall I get it while you and my friend Terry, here, go over his effects?"

"Wish you would, McCarty." The lieutenant glanced up absently from the desk where he and Keenan were sorting out a collection of small articles. "You must take a flash at these when you come back."

McCarty nodded and departed upon his self-elected errand, appropriating the flashlight which the policeman had laid on a chair. He proceeded to the opposite side of the street and measuring off with his eye the distance from the lamp-post to where the fallen man's head had rested over the curb, he followed the racing gutter for several yards down past the further warehouse to where the turbid flow was separated by a pile of refuse. There, impaled on a barrel stave, he found the sodden, shapeless brown mass that had once been a soft felt hat, and retrieving it, he carefully examined the inner side of the crown with the aid of the flashlight. The gilt lettering denoting the maker on the sweatband was so soaked as to be illegible but two initials showed plainly in the tiny, gleaming ray:—'B. P.'

With his trophy McCarty returned to the station house

to find Keenan and his superior with their heads together over a key-ring.

"There's the hat, or what's left of it." He deposited the drenched article beside the body on the floor as he spoke. "Terry, here, was watching the guy pass him and he says he was hooched up for fair, so likely there'll be nothing further come of this after his folks haul him away from the morgue, but if I'm wanted to swear that 'twas bootleg lightning and not the regular kind hit him, Inspector Druet or any of the old crowd at headquarters will know where to find me. I'll be getting on home, for I'm soaked to the skin—"

"Take a look at these first, McCarty." The lieutenant invited. "Hooch or no hooch, I'm going to find out what this bird was doing in my precinct! If that jewelry's phoney it don't go with the rest of his outfit and if it's real, what was he doing down this way with it on? Don't make any crack about his relying on us to protect him, for you walked your beat here yourself in the old days and the district hasn't changed much! What do you make of it?"

McCarty turned over the articles presented for his inspection with a carelessly critical air.

"Handkerchief, kid gloves, Wareham gold-filled watch, pigskin cigar case with two broken cigars in it, sixty—seventy dollars and eighty cents in change," McCarty enumerated rapidly. "Nothing here marked and no letters nor papers, eh? That scarf pin and those cuff buttons, fakes or not, are what they call cat's-eyes, I'm thinking. Is that all except the key-ring?"

"It is, but if this bird purposely intended to leave everything off that would give him away to whoever he was going to meet, he slipped up! Look at here!" Lieuten-

ant Taggart spoke with an air of triumph as he separated the keys of all shapes and sizes on the ring to disclose a small, thin, much-worn disk of some dull metal, one side of which bore the single numeral '4,' and the reverse three letters in old English script:—'N. Q. M.'

McCarty's stubby mustache moved slightly as his lips tightened, but he shook his head.

"What is it?" he asked. "I'd say it looked like one of those identification tags in case he lost his keys, but if 'N. Q. M.' are his initials, what is the '4'?"

The young lieutenant regarded him almost pityingly.

"It was not meant for an identification tag exactly, McCarty; at least, not for any stranger that might happen to pick up these keys, but it'll tell me more than just who this bird is and where he lived before I'm through!"

"I hope so, lad!" But McCarty still shook his head. "Happen, though, when the body is claimed you'll find he was Neil Quinn Malone, walking delegate for Stevedores' Union Number Four, and down here late for a date because of meeting up with some bootlegger's first cousins!"

"There's the ambulance!" Terry spoke suddenly as a bell clanged up the street. His honest face had reddened and his tone was a mixture of forbearance and chagrin.

"Well, I'll take the air, boys,—and the rain!" McCarty sternly repressed the twinkle in his eyes. "I'm chilled to the marrow of me, which does no good to the touch of rheumatism I've had lately, and I need no young sawbones in a white coat to tell me that guy is dead, even though there's never a mark on him! Good luck to the two of you!"

He made his way out into the storm, bending his head before the pelting downpour and chuckling as he turned

the coat collar up about his throat. The good lads back there would think that a few years of soft living had done for old Mac, and he was through!

Yet he was not chuckling when he turned into a dingy little lunch-room a few blocks away and in the look which he bent upon his coffee cup there was more of uneasy indecision than its steaming but doubtful contents warranted. He *was* through, though not in the way Terry and Taggart might be thinking. Never again would he intrude on a case that belonged to the department he had quitted! The methods had changed too much since his day when a plainclothes bull went out and got his man or was hauled up on the carpet to explain why not; it was bad enough when Headquarters began to be cluttered up with all that scientific crime detecting junk from the foreign police centers, but now they were opening up a school to teach this black art called "criminal psychoanalysis" to a bunch of fine lads in the detective bureau who needed nothing but the quick minds and strong arms that the Lord had given them already! It was his own secret and shamefaced perusal of such books on this subject as he had been able to gather, that had driven him forth with a case of mental blind staggers earlier that very evening. Well, let them psycho-analyze that man who carried the queer tag on his key-ring! And yet—!

It was a rare case! McCarty's eyes glistened and his nostrils fairly quivered with the old eagerness as he considered its possibilities. His coffee finished, he took the nearest subway that led to the rooms over the antique shop where he maintained a solitary bachelor establishment.

He had expected to find it empty as usual but to his surprise he noted that a low light glowed from behind the

shades of his two front windows and on opening the entrance door with his latchkey he was greeted by a particularly malodorous stench of tobacco wafted down the narrow stairway. There wasn't another pipe in the world that smelt quite like that one, and as he bounded upward he called:

"Denny! If I hadn't thought you were on duty at the engine house—!"

No reply came to him, however. He rounded the stairs' head and then paused in amazement on the threshold of his shabby, comfortable living-room. Dennis Riordan, engine driver from the nearest fire house and his particular crony since they had landed from the Old Country, was totally oblivious to his presence. He sprawled in the low Morris chair with a book in his hands, and his long legs writhed while his lantern-jawed face was contorted in the agony of mental concentration.

"Denny! Snap out of it!" his unheeded host commanded. "What in the name of all that's—!"

Denny "snapped." He dropped the book and sat up with a jerk, his eyes blinking.

"So you're back," he remarked dazedly. "'Tis small wonder I've seen little of you these days since you've taken to literature! Newspapers have been your limit up till now but here I use the latchkey you gave me, thinking to get in out of the rain whilst I'm waiting for you, and I find these books. Man, they're fair wonderful!—But what do they mean?"

"I don't know yet and I misdoubt the guys who wrote them do!" McCarty's tone was almost savage as he deposited his dripping hat tenderly on the corner of the mantel and peeled off the sodden topcoat. "Which one had you there?"

" 'The Diagnostics of Penology.' " Denny picked up the volume once more and read the title laboriously. "I thought a 'diagnostic' was an unbeliever and you'd taken to religion in your declining years, but 'tis all about the different kinds of criminals. I never knew there was but one—a crook!"

"No more did I." McCarty lighted a cigar reflectively. "There must be something in it, though, for that's the stuff the commissioner is going to get through the heads of the boys at headquarters in this new school of his."

"Is it, now!" Dennis' tone held a touch of awe. "Do you mean that all they'll have to do when a crime's committed will be to sit down and figure out whether the lad who pulled it off was a lunatic, maybe, or 'twas born in him, or a matter of habit or the only time he'd try it, or else that he'd been brought up to it? And what would the crook be doing meanwhile? He'd still have to be caught."

"It would all help, even though we don't get the hang of it, or the commissioner would not be trying it on the boys," declared McCarty loyally. "Some of them that have not yet been promoted to headquarters would not be hurt by anything that would teach them to use their heads now and then, I'm thinking!"

There was that in his voice which made his companion straighten in his chair, the mild gray eyes sparkling with eager interest.

"Who's been blundering now?" he demanded. "I ought to have known you would not be trailing around in the storm till near ten o'clock for the sake of your health! What it it, Mac? For the love of God, are you on another case?"

"I am not!" responded McCarty with dignity. "I'm

a real estate owner, as well you know, with no connection with the police department any more, and if an exhausted man in mortal terror or agony drops dead in his tracks and they ship him to the morgue as an acute alcoholic it's nothing to me!"

Dennis emptied the contents of his pipe into the tray and rose.

"Where do we start from?" he asked excitedly. "Thanks be, I've the next twenty-four hours off duty! Do we have a talk with his folks first or what?"

"First and last, we mind our own business this time!" McCarty waved toward the chair. "Sit down again and light up, Denny, and I'll give you the dope on it, though there's little enough according to Terry Keenan and Mike Taggart—"

"Terry Keenan and Mike—!" Dennis obeyed tensely. "That'll be down in the old precinct, then, along the waterfront! Who was the guy and what was he running from when he dropped?"

McCarty gave an account of the evening's occurrence, concisely yet omitting no significant detail. When he had finished, his visitor sat silent for a moment, turning the story over in his none too quick mind. Then he remarked:

"I don't get it at all, Mac. A prosperous, middle-aged, respectable looking fellow by what you say, with never a scrap of paper on him to show who he was, only that bit of a metal tag! He must have been running from somebody! Did you look behind you?"

"I did not, and neither did he." McCarty paused. "Mind you that, Denny! I didn't say he was trying to get away from anybody. The way he was running and stopping and then reeling along once more showed that

if he was not half-crazed with pain, 'twas only will power kept him going as far as he got. When Terry and I turned him over, the gray look of his face came from more than his slowing heart. It was horror that stared out of his eyes! He was conscious, too, though the end came in less than a minute, and muttering with his last breath."

"Do you think he might have been going some place down among the wharves at that hour, and running till his heart burst to get there on time?" Dennis' pipe had gone out in his excitement and he laid it on the tray with a tremulous hand. "Was it blackmail? Did he think whoever was waiting would kill him if he didn't show up? Mac, what manner of man was he? Fine quality clothes and cheap shoes, elegant jewelry and a gold-filled watch that could be bought on the installment plan! The cigar case was real pigskin, you tell me, but—what kind of cigars was in it?"

"Denny, you've rung the bell again, even though you don't know it!" McCarty gazed for a moment in affectionate but unflattering surprise at his old friend. "The cigars were Coronas, and there's no better nor more costly made! For all the clothes were of grand quality, they didn't fit him; they'd been carefully altered but they'd been made in the beginning for a taller and thinner man—and they'd had good wear. Only the cheap shoes were new, and though the links and pin were as rich-looking as any swell would sport they were fakes, even if I wouldn't give Taggart the satisfaction of telling him so! He'd too close a shave, remember, and his hands showed no signs of hard work; don't you make anything at all out of it?"

"He could wear the clothes, though not the shoes, of an-

other man—smoke his cigars, copy his jewelry, keep his own hands soft—? No, there's no sense to it, whatever!" Dennis shook his head slowly. "You've something up your sleeve, but what makes you figure so much on the close shave of him? Why was that number 'four' on the other side of the tag with his initials on the key-ring? Did you look to see if the same letters was in his hat?"

"It had dropped down into the gutter when he fell." McCarty had refrained for the time being from mentioning his errand after the missing headgear. "Did I say that 'N. Q. M.' were the dead man's initials? I fitted a made-up name to them in joke when Taggart was so sure about it, but it might be an address as well. You've known this town as long and as well as me, Denny; did you ever hear of the New Queen's Mall?"

"That I do," said Denny. "You mean that one block running through from the Park to the next avenue, with gates shutting it in at both ends, as though the families living in the houses on the two sides of the street was too good to mix with the rest of the world? It's right in the heart of the millionaires' part of town, with the swellest society all around, and 'twas named after some grand place in London, wasn't it?"

McCarty nodded.

"The Queen's Mall. The Burminsters came from there and they owned most of the property on both sides of this block here. The great corner mansion on the north side nearest the Park is where they live, and they moved heaven and earth to close in the street with gates, the families in the other houses liking the idea fine. The newspapers put up a holler about the street being a public thoroughfare and the whole business being contrary to democracy, but that little bunch of millionaires had their

way. That was long before ever you and me came to this country, Denny, but the inspector told me about it, and it's brought up even now when there's occasion for it at some election time or other—"

"Number Four, New Queen's Mall!" Dennis interrupted witheringly as he emptied and pocketed his cold pipe and rose with a glance at the clock. "'Tis twenty minutes to eleven, and you sit there giving me a history of New York! What are we waiting for?"

CHAPTER II

NUMBER FOUR

AT the corner the two self-appointed investigators found a taxi and Dennis, for once taking the lead, insisted upon engaging it. McCarty had protested loudly against this excursion, but the recounting of the strange event at the waterfront had aroused all the sternly-repressed longing to be back in the game once more, and although he was bitterly resentful of the new order of things at headquarters since his day the fascination of the mystery itself had gripped him with irresistible force. Not for worlds would he have admitted it to his companion, however, and as they rattled eastward through the Park he grumbled:

"You must have taken leave of your senses entirely, Denny, and I'm no better, letting you drag me out again on a night like this to gawk through barred gates at a row of rich men's houses! I've one satisfaction, though; 'twas you and not me, as you'll kindly remember, that hired this robber taxi!"

Dennis grinned to himself in the darkness.

"You're welcome to the ride, Mac!" Then his tone lowered seriously. "I've been thinking this thing over, and I must have been wrong on that blackmail notion; that the fellow was on the way to pay any, I mean, if he had only a matter of seventy dollars on him. I'm surprised at you, though, and even at Terry and Mike Tag-

gart, that not one of the three of you thought to go back across and get the hat; it could not have sailed far, in spite of the hill there and the gutters running over. 'Tis not like you—"

"Damn the hat!" McCarty interrupted irascibly. "'Tis the man himself I'm thinking of; now if the cold, muddy rain-water in the gutter had anything to do with it—?"

He mumbled and lapsed into silence and after a discreet interval his companion observed in an aggrieved tone:

"Through more than muddy rain-water have I followed you on many a case you've dragged me into, but if the grand education you've been getting lately from those books has made you talk in riddles, you can keep the answers to yourself for all of me! By the same token, if that fellow was not running away from anybody or hurrying to meet them but was just chasing along like that through the storm, staggering and stopping and leaping forward again, he must have been out of his head entirely, and the asylum would have got him if the morgue hadn't!"

"True for you, Denny; that's what was in my mind just now," McCarty replied with a contrite return to his habitual geniality. "Not about his being a lunatic, maybe, but delirious from sickness or suffering. When he fell, with his head hanging over the gutter and the cold water rushing over his face I was thinking it brought back his consciousness for that minute there at the end. You could see by the look in his eyes and the way he fought for breath that there was something he was trying his best to tell, something that filled him with more horror than the fear of death itself!"

"'Tis a lot to see in a man's eye," Dennis remarked in unusual skepticism. "Maybe he'd no notion of dying;

he seems to have been a pretty healthy looking fellow, from what you tell me. If those books are getting you to read meanings in people's faces that are not there you'd best be sticking to the newspapers!"

"'Tis small meaning anybody could read in yours, my lad!" the indignant student retorted. "Here we are and the gates are shut, just as I told you. What's the next move? You started this, Denny, and it's up to you!"

But it proved to be up to neither of them, for, as McCarty descended from the taxi before the great gates of wrought iron which spanned the side street, a tall figure emerged from the shadows and a well-known voice exclaimed in accents of satisfaction not untinged with amusement:

"There you are, Mac! I've been waiting for you."

"Inspector!" McCarty gasped, gaping at his former superior. "How in the world did you know—?"

Inspector Druet laughed.

"How did I know you'd be on the scent with the trail fresh and the wind your way? Good evening, Riordan; it's like old times to find you following Mac's lead again."

"'Tis Denny that's leading this night," averred McCarty, with a chuckle, as Dennis turned to pay the taxi driver. "In spite of the rain and all, he was possessed to come and have a look around here when I told him about the drunk that fell dead across the street from the station-house down by the waterfront!"

"The 'drunk,' eh?" Inspector Druet tapped a leather case which he carried. "I have the man's hat here which you found in the gutter, and I needn't ask if you saw the initials inside, though you said nothing to the boys at the house. When I found out you'd been on the scene, and got a line from them on the way you'd collected all

the dope on the case and then quietly faded away with a pathetic reference to rheumatism, I knew you would be on the job. Then your phone didn't answer a little while ago and I was morally certain you had read that identification tag correctly and were on your way here, so I waited. It looks as though this was going to be bigger than it appeared at first."

They had drawn under the comparative shelter of an overhanging cornice, and Dennis, who had turned to gaze reproachfully at McCarty when the hat was mentioned, asked with lively interest:

"Do you mean, Inspector, that the fellow didn't just drop dead by accident? What was the initials? Who was he?"

"The initials are 'B. P.'" The inspector spoke with added impressiveness. "I have a list of all the householders on this block; there are only a few, for you can see by the street-lamps that each place is several times the size of an ordinary city lot. The owner of Number Seven is Benjamin Parsons, and if this is his hat—?"

"But the tag on the key-ring said Number Four," Dennis observed doubtfully as the inspector paused. "Somebody named 'B. P.' might live there too, sir."

"Number Four is occupied by a bachelor alone, a Mr. Henry Orbit." The inspector shook his head. "I don't know how the keys of his house came to be in Parsons' pocket, but that's a detail. Here's the private watchman now; come on."

He moved out toward the gateway in the middle of the street but McCarty laid a detaining hand on his arm.

"Just one minute, Inspector. Well I know I've nothing to do with this case, if there is a case in it at all, but 'tis easier to change hats than houses, and if you stop

by first at Number Four, and—and let me do the talking to whoever opens the door—?"

He hesitated and Inspector Druet flashed him a keen glance.

"What is it, Mac?" he demanded quickly. "Have you seen more than I have in this?"

"I've seen the corpse, sir," McCarty returned evasively.

Along the enclosed street the solitary figure of the private watchman was advancing with quickened step. When he reached the gate the inspector spoke to him in a low but authoritative tone. The watchman uttered a startled exclamation and a brief colloquy ensued during which McCarty and Dennis gazed up the wide vista of the street beyond the high iron bars. In the glow of the lanterns which lighted the Mall the smooth pavement glistened like a sheet of glass under the dancing raindrops and the houses on either side, built of gleaming marble or the darker brownstone of an older period, looked like miniature palaces, with their vaguely outlined turrets and towers and overhanging balconies. Straight ahead loomed another gate, behind it the inky mass of foliage of the great park across the Avenue, untouched as yet by the season's first frost.

"'Tis like a picture-book scene, even in the night!" Dennis remarked, and then he shook his head. "But it's too restricted, entirely. For all its grandeur, the folks living in there will be having no more chance of keeping their private affairs one from the other than if 'twas a row of workman's cottages out in the factory suburbs! 'Tis small mystery could last for long inside these gates!"

"I'd rather be outside them and free, than cooped up in there for all the millions these families have," acquiesced McCarty. "The watchman's opening up, though, and the

inspector is beckoning. Will he be letting me have my way, I wonder?"

The great gates swung inward and the three passed in, the inspector leading and turning to the south sidewalk which was bordered by the houses bearing even numbers.

"Of course I know the servants belonging to every household on the block," the gray-haired watchman was saying in a slightly lofty tone. "Mr. Orbit has none with the initials you mention, Inspector, and no house guests at present or I should have been notified. It's my business, and the day man's, to know everybody who comes and goes through the gates."

"You see, Mac?" Dennis nudged his companion. "'Tis worse than a jail!"

But McCarty paid no heed. He was eyeing the house fronts as they passed with a gaze of critical absorption, giving quick glances at the occasional lighted windows of those across the way, but the latter were all discreetly curtained, and the first two houses on the south side were utterly dark. The third—Number Six—was a rococo affair of some pinkish stone, bristling with tiny pointed turrets and unexpected balconies. Here a brilliant light shone from the upper floors, but the next house—Number Four—although small in contrast to the mansions across the street, gave an impression of size in its stately lines of snowy marble, broken only by the windows with dark, graceful vines trailing from the boxes on each sill.

It appeared to be attached to the farther house by a conservatory of some sort, but there was no time to explore further, for the watchman had halted and Inspector Druet mounted the steps and rang the bell. McCarty followed with Dennis at his heels. As they paused, waiting, the soft but deeply resonant tones of an organ came to their

ears from behind the windows to their right, from which emanated a subdued glow of light.

From the far end of the street behind them a faint gong sounded and with an exclamation of annoyance the watchman hurried off to open the gate on the park side for the entrance of a motor car. He had scarcely passed beyond earshot when the inspector whispered to McCarty:

"What's the idea, Mac? Did you hear what the watchman said? 'B. P.' didn't belong here, in spite of the tag on the key-ring."

"No more he did, sir," McCarty agreed, but there was no disappointment in his tone. "I just want a word with the one that opens the door."

There was no sound of footsteps from within but as McCarty finished speaking the door opened. Silhouetted against the soft light was the figure of a man, before whom, for the moment, even McCarty's ready tongue was silenced. Dennis choked. They were confronted by a man who, though taller than the average of his race, was unmistakably Mongolian and clad in the flowing robes of his native land. He bowed slightly but in a dignified fashion, and then, as the visitors still remained silent, he asked:

"What is it you desire, please?"

His voice was high and singsong but it bore no trace of an accent.

"We don't want to disturb Mr. Orbit, if there's been a mistake made, but a man who says he's a servant here has met with a bit of an accident," McCarty explained. "He's kind of stout with a round, red face and a little bald spot on his head. Forty-five or nearer fifty years old, he might be. Can you tell us his name?"

He had edged closer to the side of the wide entrance

door, so that, in continuing to face him, the Chinaman had been compelled to turn until the low light played across his countenance but it remained gravely inscrutable as he listened. And although there was a perceptible pause, when he did reply, the words followed each other without hesitation.

"It is Hughes, the valet. You desire to talk with Mr. Orbit? He is engaged but I will see if he can receive you. This way, sirs."

He closed the door after them and led the way into the house. As he walked the long queue which depended from his head almost to his knees swayed with each step.

"A Chink!" Dennis whispered. "What is he, the laundress here?"

Once again his remark went unheeded for McCarty was staring about him. He had seen many wealthy homes in the past, but never had he entered an apartment of such unostentatious magnificence as this hall of Mr. Henry Orbit's house. He could not know that he walked among almost priceless treasures, that the dim panels on the walls were Catalan tapestries of the fifteenth century, that the frescoed ceiling had known the brush of Raphael himself, and that upon the great carved chair, secretly removed from the Duomo long ago, had once rested the exhausted but dauntless frame of Savonarola. The ex-roundsman could only feel with some sixth sense, that he was in the presence of beauty and he trod as lightly as his clumping boots would permit on the ancient, deep-piled rug beneath his feet.

The Chinese butler conducted them to a spacious room at the left of the hall, bowed them to chairs and withdrew, closing the door behind him. From the room opposite the swelling notes of the organ rose, filling their ears with

a thunder of harmony which made the impressionable Dennis catch his breath and instinctively bow his head.

"Come out of it, Denny! We're not in church!" McCarty admonished, and then turned to the inspector. "You see, sir, that fellow who died down there by the wharves was wearing his own cheap shoes but the expensive hand-me-down clothes of another man not his own build, and who would that have been but his employer? He'd shaved too often and very close like a man who was constantly in service, a butler or a valet, and if he borrowed, without leave, cigars too good for the likes of his taste he might have borrowed a hat, without leave as well. It struck me the keys was his own, though, along with the little metal tag and that's why I thought maybe we'd save time by stopping here first."

"You were right, again!" Inspector Druet exclaimed heartily. "I was in such a hurry that I took too much for granted. We'll see what Mr. Orbit can tell us about this man of his."

But Mr. Orbit did not immediately appear, and as the last notes of the organ throbbed into silence, Dennis found his voice.

"Valet or no, what was any one from a grand house like this doing down in that tough precinct by the waterfront, and in all the storm? Answer me that! What did he die of, did the ambulance doctor know?"

The inspector shook his head.

"It wasn't up to him to say; he just pronounced the man dead and now it's the medical examiner's job, but we'll know in the morning, after the autopsy. . . . What have you found over there, Mac, anything interesting?"

The room into which the Chinese had ushered them was

a library, modern and luxurious yet monastic in tone, with tall-backed, cathedral chairs, refectory tables and benches and dried rushes covering the inlaid marble floor. A single huge log smoldered upon the hearth and books lined the wall space from floor to ceiling between the narrow, stained-glass windows. The light came from torches held in sconces and braziers suspended from massive chains.

McCarty had strolled over to a low row of open shelves where he stood with his back to his two companions. He seemed not to have heard the inspector's query.

"It's literature he's took up now," Dennis explained gloomily, "all along of that new school the commissioner's opening at headquarters. This psycho-whatzis has gone to the head of him, and I misdoubt Mac'll ever be the same man again!"

McCarty's expression denoted symptoms of apoplexy at this slanderous betrayal, but before he turned he surreptitiously slipped into his inner breast pocket a pamphlet bound in pale blue paper which had fallen almost into his hands when he removed a larger, leather-covered volume. He replaced the latter and turned with dignity to approach the hearth once more.

"You'll need to lose no sleep over me, Denny, and there's more than me would not be hurting themselves by improving their minds!" he announced cuttingly. "The inspector's here on a case of—of sudden death, not to listen to your opinion of my private affairs!"

There was an amused but affectionate softening of the inspector's keen eyes as they glanced at his erstwhile subordinate. He opened his lips to speak when a pleasantly modulated voice from the doorway behind them fell upon their ears.

"What can I do for you, gentlemen?" it said. "I am Mr. Orbit."

The three visitors turned to find a tall, slenderly erect man in dinner clothes regarding them with gravely inquiring eyes. He must have been well over fifty, but the lines in his strikingly distinguished face were those of strength, not age, his dark hair was only lightly powdered with gray at the temples and he bore himself with the air of a man at the apex of his prime.

As he advanced into the room the inspector stepped forward to meet him.

"Sorry to have disturbed you, Mr. Orbit, but we will only detain you for a few minutes. I am Inspector Druet from Police Headquarters and these are two of my assistants. We want a little information about a certain man who carries a tag with this house address on his key-ring."

Henry Orbit nodded slowly and the concern deepened upon his face as he waved them back to their chairs and seated himself in a highbacked one facing them.

"I know of no one who carries such a tag except my valet, Hughes. Is he in any trouble? Ching Lee tells me that, from your description, the man about whom you are inquiring is undoubtedly Hughes."

"You don't seem surprised," the inspector observed bluntly. "Has this valet of yours been in trouble before?"

A shadow of regret more than annoyance crossed the face of their host and he shook his head.

"He has gotten into more than one scrape, although nothing, to my knowledge, of course, that would engage the attention of the police. I am afraid he is rather a scoundrel, but he has been with me for twenty-two years

and I cannot believe him utterly reprehensible. Has he suggested to you that I would help him now?"

"The man I'm asking about is beyond any one's help," responded the official. "He is dead."

"Dead!" the other repeated in a low, shocked tone, after a moment's pause. "It seems incredible! Only a few hours ago I gave him permission to go out! What happened? Did some accident occur?"

"That's what we want to find out," Inspector Druet announced grimly. "There are several suspicious circumstances connected with his death. Do you know of any enemies he may have had?"

Orbit frowned slightly and his glance traveled in startled amazement to the faces of McCarty and Dennis and back again to his interrogator.

"'Enemies?'" he repeated. "Surely there was no violence? I know nothing of Hughes' personal affairs but I should not have fancied he had an active enemy in the world!"

CHAPTER III

THE NOSE OF DENNIS RIORDAN

THERE was a second pause and then the inspector asked: "Did he give you any excuse for wanting an evening out to-night?"

"No, none. It was not unusual and I thought nothing of it." Orbit's hands clenched slightly. "I cannot believe that poor Hughes is really gone! Perhaps Ching Lee made a mistake, perhaps some one else had come into possession of Hughes' key-ring. Will you describe him to me, please, and tell me the suspicious circumstances you mentioned?"

"You describe the fellow, Mac; you examined him and his clothes more closely than I did." There was a double significance in the inspector's tone and he added: "Special Deputy McCarty happened to be there when this man died."

Orbit nodded and fixed his eyes expectantly on McCarty as the latter briefly complied with the inspector's request, without, however, mentioning the letters in the hat. When he had finished, Orbit exclaimed:

"It is he, beyond a doubt! The raincoat and brown sack suit were my own, given to him when I tired of them myself, and he must have copied my cat's-eye pin and links, although I never saw them. How did he die?"

"Well, sir, he was hurrying along in the rain and all of a sudden he dropped." McCarty chose his words care-

fully. "When me and a friend of mine got to him he was breathing his last and the end came as I lifted his head to my knee. . . . How did he happen to be wearing a hat with the letters 'B. P.' in it, Mr. Orbit? Who is B. P.?"

Orbit frowned again thoughtfully.

"I cannot at the moment recall any one with those initials but naturally I have no knowledge of his friends or associates," he replied at last. "Surely that is immaterial, however. What was suspicious about the poor fellow's death? He was an irreproachable servant but when his time was his own his habits were irregular and I should not have been surprised to learn that his heart had failed or he had suffered a stroke."

"Had he been drinking the last time you saw him; this evening, I think you said?" McCarty asked.

"Certainly not! I have never seen him under the influence of alcohol or he would not have remained an hour in my service. He was fully aware of this, and although I am convinced that he occasionally drank to excess he was careful never to let me see him in such a condition. Had he been drinking when you went to his assistance?"

McCarty ignored the question.

"You don't ask where that was, I notice. Have you any notion where he could have been going to-night?"

"Not the slightest," Orbit shrugged. "I have told you that I am quite ignorant of his private affairs and have had no interest in them."

"Still, he'd been your personal servant for a matter of twenty-odd years," McCarty insisted. "Wouldn't you want to know what he was up to if you learned he'd left your house to go down along the waterfront, in one of the toughest districts in the city?"

Orbit stared in genuine amazement.

"'The waterfront?'" he repeated. "I cannot imagine what he could have been doing in such a district as you describe! Even in his dissipations Hughes was never attracted by anything sordid, to my knowledge, but aped even the vices of men of a higher station than he."

"I was coming to that," McCarty remarked. "You spoke awhile back of trouble he'd got into more than once; what sort of trouble?"

"Gambling debts and indiscreet affairs with women; upper servants like himself or the wives of upper servants. When monetary settlements were in order he came to me for an advance on his salary and that is how I learned of his difficulties." Orbit paused and then added reflectively: "He has been in none of late, however; at least, none which required assistance from me."

"About what hour to-night was the last time you saw him alive?"

"At a little before seven, when he laid out these clothes for me." Orbit motioned to his attire. "Some guests were dining with me—three gentlemen, all near neighbors—and I was preoccupied but Hughes' appearance and manner must have been quite as usual or I would have noted a change. My guests are still here."

He paused significantly and McCarty replied directly to the hint.

"We're sorry to keep you from them but we've got to know what your man was doing down in that neighborhood. You don't know his own friends maybe, but you might know which of the servants employed by your neighbors he's been most friendly with, and if you don't maybe your neighbors themselves would know."

"Really, is it as important as that?" There was still no trace of annoyance in Orbit's voice or manner but merely

a dignified protest. "You can understand that any notoriety in connection with the death of my unfortunate valet would be highly distasteful to me, and to have my friends subjected to it would be doubly so. My guests this evening are Mr. Gardner Sloane and his son, Mr. Brinsley Sloane, Second, who live across the street at Number Five, and Mr. Eustace Goddard, from Number Two, the corner house next door to me here. I have no idea whether or not Hughes was even acquainted with any of the servants in either the Sloane or Goddard households, but I will inquire."

He rose and left the room, and the inspector turned to McCarty.

"Is all this necessary, Mac? I know I said this looked big but that was when I thought the man dead down there near the river was the millionaire Parsons. If it's just a dissipated valet we can let it slide, at least unless the autopsy discloses foul play of some sort."

"When you asked me if I'd seen more in this than you, inspector, I told you I'd seen the corpse," McCarty reminded him quietly. "Now you're asking me if it's necessary to find out even before the autopsy who this fellow Hughes was friendly with and I'll say it won't do any harm, because I saw him before he was a corpse! Heart disease he may have died of, or apoplexy, but it may be a good thing for us to know what brought it on him so sudden to-night, even if he was just a valet!"

There was no mistaking the earnestness in his tones and the inspector started to speak, but once more he was forestalled by the opening of the door, and Orbit ushered in three men. The first was slightly younger than his host, stout and bald except for a fringe of sandy hair. His mouth beneath the small, reddish mustache had a

humorous quirk at the corners which appeared to be habitual, his blue eyes twinkled and he regarded the police official and his two deputies with a frank and not unfriendly curiosity.

The second man was approximately the same age but his smooth-shaven face was strikingly handsome and his youthfully cut dinner coat was worn with a jauntiness which proclaimed the middle-aged gallant.

The last of Mr. Orbit's guests to enter was a tall, thin man of about thirty, whose inordinately serious expression was enhanced by the shell-rimmed glasses which bestrode the bridge of his nose. His chin was cleft, like that of the man who had immediately preceded him and there was an unmistakable family resemblance between them. Even before the introduction McCarty placed him as Brinsley Sloane, Second, the older man as his father, Gardner Sloane, and the first to enter, therefore, as the next-door neighbor, Eustace Goddard.

It was Goddard who spoke first.

"Too bad about poor Hughes, inspector. Very hard on Mr. Orbit, I must say. I've seen Hughes about the house here for years, of course, but I don't think I've exchanged half a dozen words with him in my life and I'm quite sure none of the servants in my household know anything more about him than I do."

"Why, Mr. Goddard?" asked the inspector.

"Well, for one thing, they're all elderly and staid—been with my family for years. Mr. Orbit happened to mention the fact just now that Hughes was given to dissipation occasionally. He wouldn't have found anything in common with our staff, but you are welcome to question them to-morrow as much as you please."

"Thank you." The inspector turned to the elder of the

two remaining guests. "Mr. Sloane, have you happened to notice any acquaintanceship between Mr. Orbit's valet and your servants?"

There was a slight touch of sarcasm in his voice and the flush which mounted to Goddard's scant red hair showed that the shot had gone home. Gardner Sloane responded with a hearty assumption of cordiality:

"Can't say that I have, inspector. We are a household of men, for my son and I are alone with my father, who is very old and an invalid. His male nurse, a Swede who speaks little English, and John Platt the butler who is nearly seventy, are the only servants in our employ with whom there is any likelihood that Hughes might have come in contact. However, I have observed him on several occasions in the company of a butler in service in another house on this block and although I find it very distasteful to direct even the most casual of official inquiries to an establishment presided over by an unprotected lady—"

"Father!" the young man interrupted in precise, shocked tones. "I am astonished—!"

"You usually are, Brin," interrupted the elder in his turn. "It is my duty to tell these officers what I have seen. The only servant here in the Mall I have ever noticed in Hughes' company is Snape, Mrs. Bellamy's butler; if any of them knows anything about the fellow's private affairs, it should be he."

"Which is Mrs. Bellamy's house?" the inspector inquired.

"Number Six, next door to this on the east," the younger Sloane replied hastily. "I am sure, however, that my father must be mistaken, and if you annoy Mrs. Bellamy at such an hour as this merely for below-stairs

gossip, you will distress her greatly. Indeed, why should any of us be interrogated? The man Hughes dropped dead in the street, I understand; it means nothing to any one except Mr. Orbit, who has lost an efficient servant!"

Again the inspector sent a hurried glance at McCarty, who ignored the indignant young man and turned to the master of the house.

"Mr. Orbit, have you any notion what relations Hughes had?"

"None, in this country. He was the son of a blacksmith in Cornwall who went to London when a lad and took service as a bootboy. From this he rose to the position of valet and when he came to me he was, as Mr. Sloane has observed, a most efficient one."

"Then," McCarty spoke musingly, as though to himself, "there'll be no one to notify about the funeral arrangements."

"I shall assume all responsibility, of course," Orbit announced. "I will arrange with an undertaking establishment to send for the body at once. It has been removed to the morgue?"

McCarty nodded.

"To-morrow'll do, sir; there'll have to be some formalities, permits and such. The inspector will let you know."

McCarty and his companions had remained standing since the re-entrance of Orbit with his guests and now he signaled with lifted eyebrows to his former superior and nodded almost imperceptibly toward the door. Inspector Druet nodded in response and turned to the four men collectively.

"We won't trouble you any further, and if we can obtain the information we want elsewhere it will not

be necessary to question the servants of any one living here in the Mall. Goodnight."

The Chinese butler was waiting to show them out but McCarty lingered for a moment after the others had preceded him.

"You're the butler here?"

The other bowed in silent affirmation and McCarty went on:

"How many other servants are employed here and what are their names?"

"André the chef, Jean the houseman and little Fu Moy the coffee boy. That is all except Hughes." The reply came without a pause in the falsetto singsong monotone.

"Hughes is dead," McCarty said abruptly.

Again the Chinese bowed and when he raised his head his expression had not changed an iota.

After vainly waiting for some remark in response, McCarty asked:

"You were all in to-night? Did any one leave this house since afternoon except Hughes?"

"No one."

There was a suggestion of finality in the oddly chanting tones now and the discomfited questioner shrugged and rejoined the inspector and Dennis who were waiting on the sidewalk before the many-turreted house next door. All the lights had been extinguished except one on the top floor which gleamed down upon them like a single wakeful eye.

"What were you getting out of that Chink?" Dennis demanded as they started toward the eastern gate where the watchman waited.

"Not a living thing that I wanted except a list of the other servants of the household and word that none of

them but Hughes had left the doors this night," McCarty responded disgustedly. "What he got out of me was my goat! I sprung it on him quick that Hughes had croaked and he never turned a hair nor uttered a word but just waited politely for me to go along about my business!"

"It is conceivable that Orbit told him when he went to bring his guests," the inspector observed dryly.

"Did he strike you as being the sort that would stop then to talk to one of the servants? He didn't me," McCarty averred. "He may tell this Ching Lee, as he called him, after his three neighbors go, but it'll be only so that he can break the news to the others before the morning papers come out. Twenty-two years this Hughes has been with him and Orbit knew no more about his affairs than the day he hired him! 'Tis unnatural that never once in all that time did they talk together as man to man and yet I don't think Orbit lied, at that. Look at the way he treated us! He was polite and friendly enough and never once could you have laid your finger on a word or a look from him that was haughty or arrogant like the most of them act over here when the police get snooping around, and yet didn't you kind of feel as though you were talking to a Royal Duke at the least? It's the grand manner of him, that he don't even know he's got."

"A fine gentleman, Mr. Orbit," Dennis agreed. "We've found out nothing, though, about what Hughes was doing down in Mike Taggart's precinct nor why he ran like that till he dropped, and likely we'll not find it here between these two gates."

"There's something more than that on your mind, Mac!" the inspector declared shrewdly. "You'd never have insisted on questioning Orbit's friends if you hadn't some idea of what caused Hughes' seizure, and that it led

back here! What did you see before he died that you're keeping to yourself?"

"Tell you to-morrow, inspector, if you'll drop in when you've nothing better to do, or 'phone Denny and me the word to come downtown to you," replied McCarty hurriedly in a lowered tone for they had almost reached the gate and the watchman was advancing to meet them. "Denny's off duty and I'm taking him home with me the night, though I misdoubt he'll keep me up till dawn with his wild theories as to what desperate crime took Hughes down to the waterfront! Thanks be, the rain has stopped and he'll not be wanting to ride home in state!"

But it was McCarty himself who hailed a prowling taxi when they had taken leave of the inspector and discreetly rounded a corner, and he had no time on the homeward way to glance at the meter, being engaged in mollifying his outraged companion.

"Will you never learn, you simpleton, when I'm talking about you for the benefit of somebody else?" he demanded in exasperation, when Dennis with bitter resentment had spurned his hospitality. "'Twas to put off the inspector I dropped that hint about being wishful for my sleep or he would have trailed along with us to find out what I'd got up my sleeve, and well you know 'tis nothing but the expression on a dying man's face and the way he tried to speak but couldn't! He'll have the laugh on the both of us to-morrow if the medical examiner says 'twas 'natural causes,' and he'll forget all about this night's doings, but I won't; I'm going to find out why Hughes ran the breath from his body and what it was he tried so hard to say."

"Some day," Dennis began darkly, but with a tell-tale softening in his tones, "some day you'll broadcast through me once too often and this radio station will shut down on

you! The inspector was right, though; I can see that now. Whatever made Hughes throw that fit, you think it happened back in that society fire line or you'd not have listened to the fat, bald little man, nor yet the old he-gossip and his son. I misdoubt but some night we'll be putting a scaling ladder against that iron fence and chloroforming the watchman, so you can put that butler next door through the third degree!"

Back in McCarty's rooms once more Dennis dried his rain-soaked boots comfortably before the little coal fire in the grate and watched with a quizzical light in his eyes while his host stowed his newly acquired library carefully away in a closet and then proceeded to clear out the accumulated litter of several days' bachelor housekeeping, but he said no word until the task was accomplished. Then he observed:

"When you're working on a case, Mac, you use your head, and the eyes and ears of you, but to-night another of your senses was asleep at the switch. Not that it had anything to do with Hughes, of course, but no more did anything else we learned except his name! You overlooked one little bet."

"Oh, I did, did I!" McCarty retorted, stung but wary. "And what sense of mine was it that was not working?"

"Smell." The reply was succinct. "Unless you're holding out on me, your nose was not on the job."

McCarty stared.

"What was there to smell?" he demanded. "Since when is your nose keener than mine?"

" 'Tis keen for one thing it's been trained to for many a year, and that's fire. Mac, there's been a fire in Orbit's house, and not more than a few hours before we got there!"

"A fire, is it!" McCarty snorted. "There'd likely been one in the kitchen, since dinner was cooked there, and you saw the log burning on the hearth in the library—!"

"Stoves and hearths don't burn wool and silk and carpets and varnished wood, my lad!" Dennis laid his pipe on the mantel and rose. "It could only have been a small bit of a fire, for the smoke of it had cleared away entirely, but the smell hadn't; there was enough of that hanging in the air for me to get the whiff, anyway, even though nobody else could. I've not the gift to explain it right, but there's a different smell to everything that's inflammable, if you've the nose for it, and it was house furnishings had been burned this night!"

CHAPTER IV

THE INSPECTOR BRINGS NEWS

THE twain slept late the next morning, and they had only just returned from the little restaurant around the corner, where McCarty habitually took his meals, when the bell jangled on its loose wire from below.

"Don't disturb yourself, Mac," Dennis admonished with a grin, as his host threw down his newspaper. "I'll let the inspector in."

"And why are you so sure—!"

" 'Twas not in my honor you cleaned house last night, but because you knew the inspector would be here, and you did it then for you were sure he'd come so early there'd be no time this morning." Dennis emitted one of his rare chuckles as he pressed the button which released the lock on the entrance door. "Since I've been associating so much with detectives, active and retired, I'm getting to work their way, myself!"

"It's too clever you're growing, by half!" McCarty grumbled, but there was a twinkle in his eye as he strode past the other and opening the door, leaned over the banisters. In a passable imitation of the inspector's own amusedly satisfied tones of the night before he called down: "There you are, sir! We've been waiting for you."

"The devil you have!" Inspector Druet laughed as he bounded up the stairs with a lightness which belied his

gray hair. "Getting back at me for last night, eh? If you hadn't held out on me we'd have been on the job still in the New Queen's Mall!—'Morning, Riordan! I suppose you're crowing over me, too!"

"There'll not be a peep out of me, let alone a crow, till I know what's doing, inspector, for Mac's told me nothing except the look he saw on Hughes' face," Dennis replied, as he drew forward the shabby easy-chair and placed an ash-tray within reach. His homely, long face was set in lines of deep seriousness once more and the inspector's, too, had sobered.

McCarty closed the door and taking a box of cigars from the mantel he held it out to the visitor.

"The autopsy'll be over, I'm thinking." He spoke carelessly enough but his breath labored with suppressed excitement. "What kind of poison was it, inspector?"

The inspector nodded slowly.

"I *thought* you had guessed! It was physostigmine, the medical examiner called it; powdered Calabar bean. It's colorless, has no taste, and a single grain would be fatal in three hours or a little longer, but Hughes had taken a trifle more than a grain."

"Holy saints!" gasped Dennis. "So 'twas murder, after all!"

An expression of honest gratification had stolen over McCarty's face but he shook his head.

"Many kinds of beans I have heard of, including the Mexican ones that jump like a frog, but never the sort that bring death," he said. "If one grain of it would kill in three or four hours, a little more would kill in two or maybe three, I suppose. It was around nine o'clock when Hughes fell there across from the station-house, so he must have taken that powdered bean before

he left the Orbit house or right after, though we've not yet fixed the time he did leave. I wonder what would be the symptoms of that poison?"

"I asked the medical examiner," the inspector responded. "Pain in the abdomen, nausea, then spasmodic respiration, numbness, and a complete paralysis of respiration, which of course would mean death. It doesn't explain his staggering along so that Terry thought he was drunk—"

He paused and McCarty lighted his own cigar and drew contemplatively upon it before he spoke.

"Maybe it would. The pain had passed and the nausea, but it had left him weak and the paralysis was creeping over the lungs of him so that he was fighting like mad for breath, reeling and stopping and lurching forward again. He was choking and gasping when Terry and me first turned him over and he died with a heave and a snort as if a ton weight had landed on the chest of him. It was agony that I saw in his face and the horror of knowing he'd been poisoned; he knew who did it, too, or I miss my guess, for 'twas that he was trying to tell when the end came!"

"What else did you see?" The inspector's tone held an unwonted note of asperity. "I want to know everything that happened, Mac, from the first minute you laid eyes on the fellow! If you had told me last night before the watchman opened the gates we might have saved precious time!"

"I'd nothing to tell but the look on Hughes' face and him trying so hard to speak, and that I thought maybe he'd been running like that because he was delirious from pain and not in liquor. There was no mark on him when we carried him into the station-house, at least none that

showed, and it come to me it must be poison. But with nothing more to go on than just my own private suspicions, I didn't want to air them unless the autopsy proved there was grounds for them. I'll be reminding you, inspector, that I've resigned from the Force long since and the new methods—"

"New methods be damned!" exploded the inspector. "You've said that about every case we've worked out together since you did resign, but you've come back long enough each time to find out the truth when no one else could. I told Orbit last night that you were a special deputy of mine, and by the Lord you are from now on, till we've found out who killed Hughes."

"Yes, sir," McCarty said meekly, avoiding Dennis' eye, but the latter had an immediate difficulty of his own on his mind.

"If Hughes took that poison, or 'twas give to him, either before or just after he left the house, 'twill be on that block between those two locked gates that Mac will be looking first for clues, and they're guarded night and day; you heard what that watchman said," he remarked wistfully. "You'll be getting a pass for Mac, likely, but unless a fire starts inside big enough for a general alarm there'll be no chance of me following him, inspector, and 'twill be the first case ever he tackled since he left the Force that I didn't get in on with him from start to finish, every minute I was off duty."

"Don't worry, Riordan," Inspector Druet smiled. "I've never been able to figure out which of you two has the luck, but your teamwork can't be beaten and I'll see that you get a pass along with Mac. I've had a diagram of the New Queen's Mall prepared and brought this copy with me for you two so you may know without

loss of time who owns each house and which ones are occupied."

He produced a folded paper on which the street had been roughly mapped out, with spaces, in which names and numbers had been written, blocked off from it on either side. The two bent their heads over it eagerly.

"You see there, Denny?" McCarty pointed with his forefinger. "Looking from the Avenue, the opposite gate to that we went into last night, the corner house, Number Two, on the south side belongs to the Goddards. That'll be the stout, bald fellow with the little red mustache and the twinkle in his eye, you mind him? Next to it, but separated by that bulge that looks like a conservatory, is Number Four, Orbit's house; then comes Mrs. Bellamy's, Number Six, where that butler Snape works and after that, Eight and Ten, but they're marked 'closed.' "

"The Falkinghams, Number Eight, have lived abroad for more than twenty years and the sole heiress to Number Ten is Georgianna Davenant, a little girl of twelve away at school," the inspector interposed. "That finishes the Mall on the south side, but starting at the western end again, a great house taking up the entire space opposite both Goddard's and Orbit's and bearing two numbers, 'one' and 'three' is occupied by the Burminster family, who originally owned most of the block and were the moving spirits in having it enclosed with gates. Number Five is the Sloanes'; you met two of the three generations last night—"

"That'll be the handsome, middle-aged flirt and the son who cut him out with Mrs. Bellamy," McCarty observed.

"How in the world—?" Dennis' lantern jaw hung relaxed and the inspector glanced up quickly.

"'Twas as plain as the nose on your face!" McCarty exclaimed impatiently. "Let's go on: Number Seven, next to the Sloanes', is the Parsons'. That's where this Benjamin Parsons lives, who you thought owned the hat Hughes was wearing, isn't it, sir?"

"Yes. That hat is still a factor in the case, don't forget that!" The inspector bent again over the diagram and indicated the final space. "This house, the end of the Mall on the north, belongs to the Quentin family, and two branches of it are fighting over the property; it's been unoccupied and in litigation for some years. I'm going to call at Mrs. Bellamy's now and interview her butler; want to come along?"

Dennis rose precipitately and stretched a long arm to the mantel for his hat, but McCarty said with quick decision:

"We'll go through the gates with you, sir, so that you can square us with the day watchman, but I think we'd best prowl around for awhile and not interfere with you. We might drop in at the Orbit house later to see if any of the other servants can talk a bit more than Ching Lee."

"If you do, be sure not to mention the autopsy, nor the fact that it is even suspected Hughes' death wasn't a natural one," warned the inspector as they passed out to the stairs. "I'll probably meet you there later."

They entered the Mall by way of the western gate this time and the private watchman on duty now proved to be younger and less obviously impressed by the dignity of his office than the one encountered the night before. He had evidently been apprised of their possible coming and readily assented to the inspector's demand that his two deputies be admitted in future without question. When

the official himself had proceeded to the Bellamy house McCarty turned with an affable smile to the watchman and tendered a cigar.

"Have a smoke?"

"Thanks, but I'll have to keep it till later." He was a tall, muscular young giant with a good-natured, not too intelligent countenance and he grinned in an embarrassed fashion at the overture. Then the grin faded and he added in low tones: "They haven't brought Alfred Hughes' body back yet; I've been watching for it all morning."

"It isn't going to be brought here; didn't you know?" McCarty's own tones were invitingly confidential. "Mr. Orbit told Denny and me last night that he was arranging to have it taken to some undertaking establishment and buried from there. Didn't he, Denny?"

Not yet sure of his ground, Dennis contributed merely a nod of affirmation to the conversation and after a disgusted look at him McCarty asked:

"What's your name?"

"Bill—I mean 'William' Jennings." The watchman replied promptly.

"Well, Bill, you've got a pretty soft job here, haven't you? If you're going to patrol your beat to the other gate Denny and me will stroll along with you. That's all you have to do, isn't it, except to give the eye to the pretty nurse-girls of all the kids on the block?"

Bill Jennings reddened sheepishly.

"The better the neighborhood the less kids there are in it, did you ever notice that?" he countered. "In all six of the families living on this block there are only three children: the Goddards' boy, Horace, who is four-

teen; Daphne Burminster, two years younger—she belongs in that great corner house over there but they haven't come back yet from the country—and little Maudie Bellamy. Horace is kind of sickly and has a private teacher—they call him a 'tutor'—and Miss Daphne has a maid and a governess, both of them old and sour. The Bellamy baby has the only nurse on the block and she's foreign—French, I guess."

"Some of those French girls are beauties." McCarty spoke with the air of a connoisseur and Dennis coughed. The former added hastily: "Is this one a looker?"

"Pretty as a picture and as nice as she's pretty!" There was immense respect as well as admiration in Bill's voice. "I guess she ain't been over long, for she's awful young and shy but she knows how to take care of herself, as Alfred Hughes found out."

He checked himself suddenly but McCarty chuckled with careless amusement.

"He was a great hand with the women, they tell me!" he commented.

"Not her kind! Lucette—even her name's pretty, ain't it?—Lucette is polite to everybody but Alfred Hughes didn't understand that and thought he'd made a hit, I guess. One night real late about a month ago—Dave Hollis, the night watchman told me about it—Lucette ran out to the drugstore for some medicine for little Maudie, who'd been took sick awful sudden, and when she came back Alfred Hughes met her right in front of her own house. He must have tried to put his arm around her or something for she gave a little cry and Dave, who'd waited to fasten the gate again after letting her in, came hurrying up just as Alfred Hughes said something in a low kind of a voice and she slapped his

face! Then she ran into the house sobbing to herself and Dave says he gave Alfred Hughes hell—the big stiff!" Bill checked himself again and added in renewed embarrassment. "I didn't mean to speak ill of the dead, but I guess nobody on the block had much use for him, except Mrs. Bellamy's butler, Snape; the two of them have been thick as thieves for years."

"Is that so?" McCarty turned deliberately to his self-effacing colleague. "Didn't somebody say as much to you, Denny?"

"That Hughes and this Snape were friendly? Sure!" Emboldened by having found his voice Dennis added guilelessly: " 'Twas that Chink butler at Orbit's told me, I'm thinking. Nice, sociable fellow, if he does wear a pigtail; didn't you find him so, Mac?"

"I found he'd more brains than most of the galoots who come over here and land in the fire department!" McCarty retorted with withering emphasis, then turned to the watchman again. "What sort of a guy is this Snape—the same kind as Hughes?"

"Underneath, maybe, but you'd never think it to look at him. He's younger by ten years at least than Hughes, slim and dark and minds his own business. If it wasn't for the gates you'd never know when he went in or out."

McCarty darted a quick, sidelong glance at his informant.

"Keeps funny hours, does he?"

"Late ones." Bill grinned again. "I guess Mrs. Bellamy doesn't know it, but being the only man in her house he has it all his own way. He ain't any too anxious to have his doings known, though, for Dave says he's tried more than once to slip in with the milk! I ain't spoke

ten words to him and I've held down this job over a year. Here comes Horace Goddard now!"

The trio had strolled past the closed houses which flanked that of Mrs. Bellamy and were nearing the eastern gate. As Bill hurried forward, McCarty glanced through the high iron bars of the fence and saw a slender, undersized boy, with very red hair and a pale, delicate face, who approached with a droop of his narrow shoulders and a dragging step. At sight of Bill Jennings opening the gate, however, he quickened his pace, a smile lifting the corners of the sensitive mouth.

"Hello, Bill!" His voice was still a clear, almost childish treble.

"Hello, there, buddy! What's the good word?" the watchman returned cheerily.

"It isn't very good, not for me!" The boy's face clouded once more. "Mr. Blaisdell is going away on a sketching tour for October. I—I wish I could go with him! He'd take me but Dad won't hear of it!"

The two listeners who had remained a little apart, saw now that he carried a small leather portfolio and a sketch book.

"An artist, the lad is!" Dennis exclaimed beneath his breath. "It's out playing baseball he should be, and getting into a good healthy fight now and then. Look at the hollow chest and spindly legs of him!"

"Poor little cuss!" McCarty murmured as Horace Goddard with a parting word to the watchman passed them with a mere glance of well-bred inquiry. "Say, Bill, what's that family doing to the kid? Making him learn to paint?"

The watchman had strolled up to them once more and at the question his grin broadened.

"*Make* him? They can't keep him away from it! We're great buddies, him and me, and he's a lonesome kind of a little feller and talks to me every chance he gets. You heard what he said? This Blaisdell guy is one of the greatest painters in the country and he met the kid at Mr. Orbit's house one day and took a fancy to him. He let Horace come to his studio and watch him work, it seems, and Horace began trying to copy him and now he's giving him regular lessons. Going to stroll back? I take the other side of the street."

"No, we'll be looking in to see what arrangements Mr. Orbit has made for the funeral." McCarty touched Dennis' sleeve. "So long."

"See you later." Bill nodded and turned to cross to the opposite sidewalk and his erstwhile companions started back the way they had come.

"A lot you got out of him!" Dennis remarked.

"I got what I was looking for, dope on some of the families and their servants," replied McCarty. "I didn't want to crowd him too much at the first go, and besides, we've no more time to spend on him just now."

"Going to tackle that Chink again?" asked the other innocently.

"I'm going to tackle every last mother's son of them!" McCarty set his lips firmly and his step quickened. "I want a talk with Orbit, too, before the inspector breaks the news."

In response to their ring at the bell the door was presently opened by a fat little Chinese boy, whose round, yellow face was wreathed in smiles. On seeing them he bowed straight forward from the waist with both short arms spread wide and ushered them into a huge, dim room at the left, where their footsteps rang on a bare,

mosaic floor of exquisite design and inlay. McCarty observed that the whole opposite wall was of glass, curving out in a swelling arc, like a gigantic bow window. It was filled with a mass of strange, vivid flowering plants, the like of which neither of the visitors had ever seen before, and a delicate, elusive fragrance hung upon the super-heated atmosphere.

On their right, at the back, the pipes of an enormous organ reared their slender tubes. Stone settles and benches were scattered about, backed by towering masses of palms and cacti, but the echoing, high-ceilinged room held no other furnishing.

They seated themselves on the nearest marble bench and McCarty, who was commencing to perspire freely, pulled out his handkerchief and mopped his forehead.

" 'Tis for all the world like that grand undertaker's where the lodge gave Corcoran his funeral!" Dennis had spoken in his normal tones but they swiftly sank to a hoarse whisper as they reverberated. "God save us, did you hear that? It's worse than a tunnel!"

"Wisht! The little heathen is still hanging around." McCarty admonished. "Come here, son."

The little boy who had lingered in the doorway smiled again and sidled forward silently in his soft embroidered slippers.

"My name Fu Moy," he announced.

"Oh, you're the coffee boy?" McCarty remembered his conversation with the butler.

"Can do!" Fu Moy bobbed his head delightedly at the recognition.

"And is Ching Lee your father?" McCarty disregarded the dissimilarity in family names.

"Ching Lee on-clee." He labored over the difficult

word with evident anxiety to make himself understood

"Uncle, is he?" His questioner paused. "You know Hughes?"

The round face clouded.

"Me catchum Mlistler Hughes. Me no like. Mlistler Hughes gone away. Me glad."

"That," observed Dennis judiciously, "was straight from the shoulder. I couldn't have put it better myself if I'd known the spalpeen!"

Fu Moy hung his head shyly but McCarty pulled a shining new quarter from his pocket and held it out.

"You catchum some of those nuts with the raisins inside for yourself—lichee.—But tell me first why you no like Hughes."

The small, yellow, claw-like hand closed avidly over the coin.

"When Honorable Gleat Lord come, Mlistler Hughes say Fu Moy velly nice boy. When Honorable Lord no come, Mlistler Hughes kickee, stlikee, hurtee head, allee time say Fu Moy go hellee." The little slippered foot shot out suggestively and he rubbed his ear in realistic fashion.

"The dirty hound, for abusing and cursing a little shaver, heathen or no!" Dennis exclaimed. "Who's the honorable lord, youngster? Mr. Orbit?"

Again Fu Moy nodded and a look of adoration shone on the childish face.

"Can do!" His tone was fervid. "Honorable Lord Orblit velley gleat man, allee same Lord High Plince!"

"So that's that! We know how he stands with the kid, all right," McCarty interposed as Dennis started to speak again. But Fu Moy had evidently struck a congenial topic.

"Ching Lee catchum Mlistler Hughes make do." He pulled up the sleeve of his embroidered silk jacket disclosing the fresh, livid marks of five thick fingers on his plump arm. "Ching Lee gettee knifee, can do!"

Fu Moy drew his hand across his throat and Dennis shuddered.

"For the love of the saints!"

"When was this?" McCarty was careful to keep his tone indifferent.

"Yes—yes—!"

"Yesterday?"

Fu Moy's bullet head bobbed.

"Honorable Lord come takee knifee away from Ching Lee, say no can do, p'leecee man would come. He say Mlistler Hughes hurtee Fu Moy he go! Mlistler Hughes gone. Honorable Lord one piecee gleat man." He looked down at the coin and then up with a sudden thought. "Lichee nuts no can do! Slipples can do! Slipples 'long Honorable Lord!"

He had gestured toward his feet and Dennis turned puzzled eyes on his companion.

"Does the youngster mean that he wants to buy a pair of slippers for Orbit?" Fu Moy's expression was sufficient answer, and Dennis suggested: "Sure, he must have plenty of slippers, lad?"

Fu Moy's head shook decisively.

"Allee blurn. Bang-bang flier Honorable Lord's loom. Littlee flier, gleat big bang-bang! Slipples 'longside chair, all same blurn."

"I've got him!" McCarty spoke aside in a hurried undertone; to the little boy whose dark, bright, slant eyes were fixed upon him as though for approval, he added: "Sure, son! Get your honorable lord a pair of slippers,

and if you can find any for a quarter let me know where. Now you run and tell him that two of the men who were here last night would like to speak to him. Think you can make him know what you mean?"

"Honorable lord—speakee—Mac and me—here?" Dennis interpreted unexpectedly.

The child nodded gravely.

"Can do. Honorable Lord talkee my talk." With another bow he turned and trotted from the room, and Dennis murmured:

"Could you beat that? Orbit speaks Chinee! That kid was talking about the fire last night, but what did he mean by 'bang-bang'? Did somebody fire a shot, do you suppose?"

"They did not!" McCarty replied impatiently. "Something exploded in Orbit's room and set fire to a chair and the slippers under it, but that's neither here nor there. He's a bright kid, little Fu Moy, with a gift of the gab that I'm wishful his uncle had! Only yesterday this Ching Lee tried to murder Hughes for mistreating the child, but Orbit stopped him; Fu Moy's just been told that Hughes has gone away, Denny, and he thinks Orbit discharged him and worships the boss accordingly. I wonder if maybe Ching Lee tried again? I wonder if he ever heard of the Calabar bean?"

CHAPTER V

CHING LEE'S ERRAND

"GOOD MORNING, gentlemen." Henry Orbit appeared in the doorway and came forward. "Has your inspector news for me about the removal of Hughes' body? I have made all the arrangements."

There was a weary note in his voice and the pallor of fatigue had spread over his strongly marked features, but it only added to the distinction of his appearance and his eyes seemed if anything more brilliantly alight than on the previous evening. A plum-colored house-robe swathed the tall, erect figure, but he was immaculately groomed and it was only when he had almost reached the visitors that they saw he carried under one arm a tiny, wistful-eyed monkey.

Dennis gave a start but McCarty replied quietly:

"The inspector gave us no message about the body, sir, but no doubt you'll hear from him any time now. We'd like to fix the exact time Hughes left the house. The last you saw of him was a little before seven, I think you said. Was that before or after the fire in your room?"

"Some little time before. I have Vite, here, to thank for that." A faint smile curved Orbit's mobile lips and he stroked the little creature in his arm with a reassuring gesture as it whimpered at the mention of its name. "An alcohol cigar-lighter was left burning on my desk and in his haste to follow me downstairs Vite knocked it over,

setting fire to an upholstered chair, but Fu Moy, the coffee boy who admitted you just now, discovered it before any further damage was done and summoned Ching Lee. Fu Moy was as pleasantly excited about it as any small American boy would have been, but he should not have annoyed you with his chatter. I suppose it was he who told you?"

"No, sir. I knew it last night," Dennis remarked. "I smelled it."

"To be sure! I could not myself detect it downstairs but when I retired the odor drove me to one of the guest rooms and although I am an experienced traveler I do not sleep well in unaccustomed surroundings; that is why you find me still *en déshabillé* at this hour." He glanced down at the house-robe and then added with a touch of sadness in his voice. "To be truthful, I could not get poor Hughes out of my thoughts. After all, twenty-two years is a long time."

"It is that, Mr. Orbit. When he laid out your clothes and asked for the evening off, did he leave you at once?"

"Yes. I told him to go and have his dinner; the servants always dine early when I am entertaining, for their meals are prepared separately. That is how the cigar lighter happened to be left burning. I can't tell you what time he went out but perhaps André or Jean would know, or Ching Lee. André is the cook; shall I have him sent to you here?"

"If it's all the same to you we'll go to the kitchen and talk to him." McCarty glanced at the mass of exotic blooms, vividly ablaze where the sun poured in upon them through the glass wall. "You've some wonderful flowers, Mr. Orbit."

"The orchids are rather rare; some of them have never

been known to thrive above the equator before and the cacti and palms usually do not grow north of Central America. I'm quite proud of them. But come. I will show you the way to the pantries and kitchen."

McCarty gasped thankfully in the comparatively chill atmosphere of the hall after the almost overpowering heat of the conservatory and the two followed along a narrowed hall toward the rear. Half-open double doors at the left past the library revealed a great formal dining-room and back of the conservatory, on the other side of the wall against which the organ had been installed, there appeared to be a combined picture gallery and card room, for the walls were lined with paintings whose massive frames all but touched and green-clothed tables of various sizes stood about on the brightly waxed surface of the marquetry floor.

"Ring the bell in the pantry for Fu Moy and he will bring you to me if there are any questions you would like to ask after you have seen André or Jean." Orbit had paused before a door at the end of the hall. "Ching Lee is out at present but I shall be glad to give you any assistance in my power. Since the inspector attached so much importance to it I find that I am curious myself to know what errand could have taken Hughes to the quarter of town in which he died.—Beyond the butler's pantry you will find the kitchen pantries, the refrigerating room and then the kitchen."

"All right, then," McCarty responded. "The chances are that we won't bother you again before we go."

He pushed open the door as Orbit turned, and Dennis followed him into the spacious white-tiled room shining with glass and porcelain. A door further along in the same wall as that by which they had entered evidently

opened into the dining-room but McCarty led the way to another facing them and they passed down a short corridor and into a spacious kitchen.

A fat man immaculate in starched white apron and cap, with a round, ruddy face and bristling black mustache turned on them belligerently from a long pastry table.

"What is this, that you come to my kitchen? *Sacré Nom!* If M'sieur Obeet know this—!"

"Don't let that worry you, André! Mr. Orbit just showed us the way through the pantry," McCarty interrupted. "We'd like to ask you a few questions about Hughes."

"Mon Dieu! Les gendarmes!" André raised his floury hands in dismay.

"What's that you're calling us?" demanded Dennis advancing truculently and the fat chef retreated behind the table in haste.

"'Gendarmes' it is French for Messieurs of the Police!" he stammered, his conciliatory tone comically at variance with the fierce expression lent to him by the bristling mustache. "I know nothing of Hughes, nothing! He goes out last night upon his own affairs and in the morning Ching Lee comes to me and tells me that he is dead, he falls in the street with a—a seekness of the heart. Is it not so? *Alors,* why do the police interest themselves?"

"Ching Lee told you that, did he?" McCarty seated himself and Dennis took a chair by the door. "Did you ever hear Hughes complain of a weak heart?"

"But no! It—it was something else, then, which have killed Hughes?" André asked quickly, then checked himself with a shrug. "What is it that you would have me tell you?"

"How long have you worked for Mr. Orbit?"

"It will be seex years next month. I am chef for a friend of M'sieu in Paris and when he is kill' in the war M'sieu send for me. When the war it is finish' M'sieu permits that my cousin Jean who was a *poilu* come also to be houseman. Jean and me, we do not concern ourselves with the affairs of Hughes, we know of him nothing!"

"Who comes here to see him, besides Snape, the butler from next door?" McCarty asked.

"No one." André wiped his hands and came slowly around the table. "It is not often that we see Snape, for he arrive' in the evening late, and when the dinner is finish' Jean and me, we have our own affairs together."

"What time did you and the rest have dinner last night?" McCarty dropped the futile line of questioning. "It was before you served Mr. Orbit and his company, wasn't it?"

"But yes. At seex hours and a half." The reply came promptly, in obvious relief.

"Did Hughes eat with you?"

"Of a certainty!" André looked his surprise. "Fu Moy arrange' the tables in our dining-room there—one for himself and Ching Lee, who prefers that they eat alone together, and the other for us three, but Hughes he is late, he attend upon M'sieu. Ching Lee and Fu Moy have almost finish' and Jean and me, we think we will wait no longer when at last Hughes he comes."

"Did he tell you he was going out?"

"Not until after dinner. Ching Lee have gone to make complete the table for M'sieu and his guests and Fu Moy to robe himself in the little jaquette of embroidered satin that later he may serve coffee and liqueurs. Then Hughes

says that he will go for a walk. Jean warns him that it will make rain—how you say? A storm, it is coming, but Hughes does not care, it is for his health that he walks. Jean and me, we think that is droll for there is nothing the matter with the health of Hughes, only that he drinks too much and often he is out very late." Again André checked himself and then went on hurriedly. "It is the last month, perhaps two, that he is not look so well, but he is not seek, nevaire. He goes, and—"

"What time was this?" McCarty interrupted.

"At a little past seven hours, perhaps half, but me, I am engage' with the dinner of M'sieu, and Jean he cleans our dishes; we pay not much attention. Hughes says 'good night' and goes out the side door here into the allee which leads to the tradesmen's entrance. That is the end of Hughes."

With a gesture of dismissal he turned to the range and tested the heat regulator of the oven, but McCarty remained seated.

"The fire broke out in Mr. Orbit's room after Hughes left, then?"

"Yes. You have heard of that?" André turned again with uplifted brows. "It was nothing, we do not even know of it until it is all over. Little Fu Moy, he see the smoke and the single tongue of flame and he cry for Ching Lee who puts it out. M'sieu, he is downstairs awaiting his guests and it is said that the *singe*—the monkey—Vite have upset the cigar lighter, but me, I think it is Fu Moy who makes play with the matches! He is a bad child, that little Fu Moy!"

"You say that Hughes has not looked so well lately," McCarty ignored the subject of the coffee boy's delinquencies. "Did he seem worried, like, or as if anything

was on his mind that might have hurt his health, weakened his heart, maybe?"

André shrugged once more.

"He is if anything in the greater spirits and Jean and me, we think that he have win at the cards. He looks—how do you say?—dissipate', and tired because he creeps in with the dawn."

"Does Mr. Orbit know of this?" McCarty feigned surprise. "It's a wonder he'd have kept him."

"If he suspects he says nothing, because no matter how late Hughes arrive at home he is always up promptly in the morning and he drinks only when M'sieu shall not know. He is the perfect valet and M'sieu asks no more."

"Well, we won't either, just now." Dennis had taken no part in the inquiry but now as McCarty spoke he signaled him an agonized glance and the latter nodded.

"André, when did that fire break out?" Dennis drew a deep breath.

"Last night? It must have been but a moment or two after the departure of Hughes for it is still less than eight hours when it is finish, before the three gentlemen arrive."

"Before you knew of it, then,—say, a few minutes after Hughes left; did you hear anything?" Dennis pursued carefully. "A kind of a bang! it would be, like a firecracker going off, if you know what that is."

"The red fire toys of Fu Moy which explode when he lights them? I know!" André responded grimly. Then a reflective look came over his round countenance. "It appears that I did hear a single, quick noise, like the violent closing of a door somewhere above which make the house to tremble! Me, I am occupied with the *chateaubriand,* that it cook not too fast, and I think not of it again. But what—"

"Nothing. That's all I wanted to know." Dennis turned to his companion. "Let's be moving, Mac."

He started along the corridor but McCarty stopped him at the foot of a narrow, winding staircase.

"We'll go up here, Denny, for a minute. I want a look around."

"No more than I do, myself!" Dennis returned promptly. "It's beginning to come to me that Hughes was not over popular around here. I wonder what this Jean thought of him?"

What Jean thought was speedily ascertained for they came upon him in the upper hall, energetically waxing the floor; a slim, dark, youngish man with a deep scar across his smooth-shaven face and a nervous, jerky manner as though every muscle and nerve were strung on wires.

"It was unfortunate that Hughes should have died so suddenly but what would you? A man so gross, who ate like a great pig and drank like a sot and took no care of himself," Jean replied to his own observation with a shrug and applied his energies anew to his task.

"Where were you last evening, Jean, while Fu Moy was setting the tables in the servants' dining-room?" McCarty asked, as though in an afterthought.

"In the kitchen assisting André. It is not my work but André is occupied with the dinner of Monsieur Orbit. I arrange first the trays for Fu Moy and he take them to the table and then call his uncle, Ching Lee. André and me, we await Hughes—"

"So Ching Lee and Fu Moy ate alone in the dining-room for awhile before Hughes came down, and you and him and André went in to have your own dinners?"

"Yes, m'sieu." Jean had risen from his knees and now he regarded his questioner expectantly but for a

moment McCarty seemed lost in thought. Then he roused himself.

"What did you have?"

"A soup of vegetables, ragout of lamb, a salad and cheese and coffee," Jean responded. "There was rice also for Ching Lee and Fu Moy, and pastry from Monsieur Orbit's *déjeuner,* which I placed for Hughes but he desired it not."

"Did he eat as much as usual?" McCarty asked quickly.

"Like a glutton at first but he is finished very soon, he is satisfied and the remainder of his dinner goes almost untouched. Then he goes out for a walk, so he tells to André and me, in spite of the storm which is coming." Jean's face twisted in a grimace of knowing incredulity. "It takes him not five minutes to change and then he is gone."

"Did you help André dish up the dinner for Mr. Orbit and his friends?"

"I assist him, but it is soon over, for when the guests are only gentlemen the menu is very simple though always of the best. At half past eight dinner is served and in an hour it is finished and we are making all clean in the kitchen. Some French papers have arrived for us in the mail but yesterday and we take them to André's room to read; at eleven we go to bed."

The man spoke glibly enough, but why without being asked had he volunteered a detailed account of how he had spent the evening? Did he consider it necessary to establish an alibi, and if so, what reason had he? There was a frank, open look to him, McCarty thought, and anyway there would be no sense in disputing with him now; even if he was lying André would back up that statement of his.

"Do all of you sleep on the same floor?"

Jean nodded.

"At the top of the house. Shall I show you—?"

"No, I'll be taking a look around later, maybe. What else is on this floor besides Mr. Orbit's room?"

"Monsieur's suite," Jean corrected. "He has a private sitting-room also, in addition to the bed-room and dressing-room. The rest of this floor and all of the one above are arranged in suites for guests."

"Does Mr. Orbit have much company staying here in the house?" McCarty's gaze had wandered to the many doors on either side of the broad corridor.

"Not many. Only one or two at a time have I seen since I came, and all gentlemen. Never are ladies guests of the house although often they dine here or arrive for the affairs of society which Monsieur gives.—But I must arrange the table now for *déjeuner,* because Ching Lee is out."

He gathered up his brushes and started for the back stairs but McCarty stopped him.

"Where did Ching Lee go? Did Orbit send him on an errand?"

"I do not think so." Jean hesitated. "When Monsieur sends him—which is but seldom, for nearly always I go,—he tucks up his queue and arrays himself in American attire, but to-day, as when he goes about his own affairs, he wore the ordinary dress of his country; not the magnificent embroidered robes of silk but the plain, dark dress one sees upon *les Chinois* everywhere. It is now two hours since he has gone."

He turned once more to the stairs and this time McCarty made no effort to detain him. He waited until the houseman's footsteps had died away in the hall below

and a door had closed. Then he turned to where Dennis had been standing just behind him.

"Get that, Denny? I'm thinking—!" He paused, for he was talking to the empty air. Dennis had disappeared.

With a shrug McCarty mounted to the next floor but no one was visible and each of the several doors which he opened gave upon bedrooms furnished in different periods of the Italian and French monarchical régimes. He only knew that they seemed very handsome, if the rugs and draperies did look a bit faded and draggled to his eyes and the gilt tarnished, but about all there hung the aloof, cheerless air of apartments seldom tenanted.

The floor above was evidently cut up into many smaller rooms, for there were more doors closer together. Several of them were locked and the first which opened readily was that of a large room at the back, furnished merely with two chests of drawers and two matting covered cots heaped with cushions. Matting was laid upon the floor, a niche in the wall was hung with rich silk upon which a gorgeous dragon was emblazoned and lanterns were suspended from the ceiling. McCarty sniffed the faintly aromatic odor as of sandalwood which greeted him and knew that this must be the room Ching Lee shared with Fu Moy.

Closing the door he retraced his steps and tried another just at the head of the stairs. It opened into a room slightly smaller than the first but comfortably furnished in old oak with a bright rug on the floor and simple curtains at the two broad windows. Military brushes and other masculine toilet accessories were scattered on the dresser and a rack which hung beside it glowed with the rich, subdued colors of a score or more neckties and scarves. Across the foot of the bed lay a lounging robe

of heavily quilted brocade but somewhat worn and frayed.

Was this where one of the Frenchmen slept or—? McCarty strode to the closet and flung the door wide. Suits of plain black alternated with others of conservative shades and material but far more expensive; a glance showed that they were much too large for the slender houseman, yet not sufficiently capacious to accommodate the chef's rotund girth.

If this, then, were Hughes' room could he have left any clue behind him which would point to his unknown enemy? A hasty examination of the closet revealed an empty whiskey bottle among the boots on the floor, but the pockets of the various garments contained merely small bills and newspaper clippings of racing results.

In the top drawer of the dresser McCarty came upon a stack of letters in different handwriting but all unmistakably feminine and sentimental in tone, couched in more or less illiterate terms. He took possession of them for reading at his leisure. The lower drawers contained only clothing and there were no other receptacles in the room which might have held papers but his experienced eye noted a slight unevenness in the surface of the rug near the head of the bed and turning it back he found a bank-book and a check-book fastened together with a rubber band.

These he pocketed also and then descended to the first bedroom floor where Dennis had deserted him, to discover that individual hovering uncertainly about the stairs' head.

"Where the devil did you take yourself off to?" he demanded. "If the inspector let you in on this with me 'twas not to gum up my game, Denny Riordan! Moreover, whenever you go off on your own hook—!"

"Let be, Mac! The inspector's here, talking to Orbit now in his private sitting-room, they all but caught me snooping around in there!" Dennis interrupted. "He's sprung it on him that Hughes was poisoned!"

"Come on downstairs and tell me what you heard." McCarty led the way without further waste of words and Dennis followed him to the entrance hall below where they stationed themselves in the embrasure of a window beside the door.

"Whilst you were asking Jean about the lay-out of the rooms upstairs I thought I'd have a look at the ones Orbit keeps for himself," Dennis explained in a slightly defiant tone. "He sleeps in a bed with a roof to it, all hung with curtains like a hearse. The chair that was burned is gone but there's a scorched place in the rug and the smell is hanging on the air yet. I took just a peep in the bathroom, which is fitted up like a gymnasium and almost as big, and then I went on into the sitting-room. 'Tis grand, Mac, with books and pictures and flowers everywhere, to say nothing of the window boxes just ablaze with flowers for all it's near frost. There's a piano, too, with big sheets of paper covered with hen-tracks on the rack as if somebody'd been writing music by hand, and I was just looking at it when I heard the inspector's voice and him and Orbit coming along the hall. I ducked back into the bedroom and then I stopped for I caught the last word the inspector was saying; it was 'murder!' "

It was an unprecedentedly long speech for the taciturn Dennis and as he paused for breath McCarty rubbed his chin reflectively.

"How did Orbit take it?"

"For a full minute you could have cut the stillness with a knife and then he says low and shocked, like: 'My God,

how frightful! You're sure there's no possibility of a mistake about it, inspector? But your man who witnessed it said nothing last night about foul play! I understand that poor Hughes simply dropped in the street when no one was near.' Then the inspector up and told him it was poison, giving it that long name 'physos'-something, and Orbit says could it be possible, that he'd heard of it, of course, being a bit of a bot—botanist, but 'twas rare, and how could anybody have got hold of it to give to Hughes, and why?" Dennis paused again and then added conscientiously: "Maybe them wasn't just the words, Mac, but he was struck all of a heap. I was afraid they'd be coming in and catching me so I beat it out to the head of the stairs where you found me.—Wisht! They're coming down now!"

"I'll be waiting for a word with the inspector," McCarty announced hurriedly. "I've a job for you, Denny, if you'll not be shooting your mouth off!"

A door above had opened but it was evident that Orbit and his companion had paused, for no sound of footsteps ensued and Dennis asked eagerly:

"What is it, Mac? Well you know I'm not given to talk—!"

"Then listen! Run down to the old waterfront precinct and see is Mike Taggart or Terry around; tell them I stopped by the fire house this morning on the way out to my Homevale estates and mentioned the fellow that dropped dead down there last night, and you thought from my description maybe you knew him. You're disgusted that I took so little interest and it's your opinion I'm not the man I was—"

"And who says so?" demanded Dennis with loyal indignation.

"You do, you blockhead!" McCarty retorted. "Let them knock me and get all the dope you can about last night, and then bring up old times when I walked my beat there and you used to come around for a word with me and the rest of the boys. Say the neighborhood looks about the same to you but you kind of recall seeing more Chinks hanging out in the doorways, and wasn't there a laundry or a chop suey joint on the block?"

" 'Tis you should know there wasn't!" Dennis' tone was bewildered but a light suddenly dawned in his gray eyes and he added in a sepulchral whisper: "Mac! You don't mean—! You're thinking—!"

"I'm wishful to know if there was a strange Chinaman in that street this morning; one that was curious, maybe, about what happened last night. If there was, his queue might have been tucked up or swinging free, but I've a hunch he'd look like Ching Lee!"

CHAPTER VI

DEADLOCK

DENNIS had scarcely departed on his errand when the inspector and Orbit came down the stairs together and the latter remarked to McCarty:

"You didn't tell me Hughes had been poisoned!"

"No, sir," McCarty agreed. "'Twas not for me to say: I told you I'd no message for you about the body but you'd hear from the inspector. There's no chance he could have took that Calabar bean powder—I disremember its other name,—by mistake, is there? Would it be lying around the house here for any purpose?"

"Hardly!" Orbit smiled. "I have read of its use as a cure for lockjaw and an antidote for some other poison —strychnine, I believe,— but one would not find it in an ordinary, normal household!—You'll let me know, inspector, if I can do anything to further your investigation?"

The inspector promised, somewhat superfluously, and as they descended the steps he observed to his companion:

"It's a damn funny case, Mac! The Bellamy woman's butler is a smooth proposition, but as far as I could make out he came clean; he's been playing the races with Hughes in a poolroom down on Thirtieth and gambling in a joint over on the East Side, and Hughes was stuck on some new Jane named 'Gertie.' Snape thinks she's a married woman, though he never saw her nor heard

her last name, and she doesn't belong on this block. He wasn't with Hughes last night and didn't even know he'd gone out."

"Did you see anybody else in that house?" asked McCarty.

"Only a mighty pretty nursemaid going out with a baby. Did you have any luck at Orbit's?"

"Not much," McCarty responded guardedly. "I'll tell you later if you'll drop around to my rooms. I want to have another talk with the stout, bald little guy next door here, Goddard."

"All right. I think we're wasting our time, though, here in the Mall. If we can trace Hughes' movements from the minute he passed out of that gate there until he fell dying in front of you, we'll nail the fellow who slipped him that Calabar bean; there won't be much to this case, Mac."

McCarty watched the inspector cross the street to the stately old entrance to Number Seven and then proceeded to the corner house and rang the bell. An elderly butler, with the pallor of a long lifetime of indoor service admitted him, shaking his head dubiously. It was some little time before Eustace Goddard appeared.

"'Pon my soul, you fellows are persistent!" His blue eyes twinkled with lively curiosity as he spoke. "Never knew of such a fuss being made over the death of a servant before! I suppose you've come to question mine?"

"After a bit," McCarty smiled grimly. "Servant or no, we're bound to make a fuss, as you call it, when it's a case of murder."

"What? You don't say so!" Goddard ran his hand over the fringe of sandy hair adorning his bald pate. "Devil of a thing for Orbit, the notoriety and all!

Can't see why he kept the fellow; I never did like his looks!—But who killed him?"

"That's what we're asking!" McCarty retorted. "First of all we've got to fix the time he left the house. Did you see him when you went there to dinner last night?"

"No. It was about quarter past eight and just beginning to rain when I went next door. Ching Lee admitted me and I found Orbit in the library; the Sloanes came a few minutes later and we four went in to dinner and then played a rubber or two of bridge. I've never seen Orbit in better form; he's a splendid player but last night his game was extraordinary and we had a rattling good time until you fellows showed up!"

"You weren't playing cards when we got there," McCarty suggested.

"No, we'd finished and gone into the conservatory. Orbit was at the organ; you must have heard him." Goddard spoke in short, jerky sentences as though out of breath and a deeper flush had mounted in his ruddy cheeks. "Don't pretend to know much about music myself but Orbit can make those pipes talk and I never heard him play as he did last night! His own composition, too; he's a genius!"

"You've known him long?"

"God bless me, yes! He was my idol when I was a little boy and he a big one, home from school for the holidays. Then came the university and after that he traveled for some years, returning only at his father's sudden death. He brought Hughes back with him then." Goddard checked himself as though recalled all at once to a consciousness of his visitor's identity. "About last night, though, I saw none of the servants except Ching Lee and Fu Moy."

"Have those two been with Orbit a long while?"

"Ching Lee has; little Fu Moy only appeared a year or so ago. But Orbit himself can tell you—"

"You visit in there a lot, don't you?" McCarty interrupted.

"Naturally, when Mr. Orbit is in residence." A shade of stiffness had manifested itself in the genial, garrulous tones. "He frequently closed the house and went away for long trips, although not of late years!"

"Then you must have seen a good deal of Hughes," persisted the interrogator.

Goddard shook his head decisively and his small, reddish mustache seemed to fairly bristle.

"As I told you last night I have hardly addressed the fellow half a dozen times in my life. He was self-effacing, like any other well-trained servant; you'd scarcely know he was there. Then, too, I never had much occasion to see him, for though such old friends Orbit and I have not been on an intimate footing; Mrs. Goddard and I dine there or I run over for an evening of bridge now and then, that's about the extent of our intercourse."

"Oh, Dad!" The clear, treble voice which McCarty had already heard sounded from the hall and the red-haired, delicate-looking boy appeared in the doorway. "Dad, that old Hughes is dead! Now he'll never be horrid to Max any more when he follows me over to Mr. Orbit's!"

"Run away, Horace!" Goddard ordered peremptorily. "Dad's busy—!"

"So Hughes was horrid to Max, was he?" McCarty interrupted with the broad, ingratiating smile which always won juvenile confidence. "And who is Max, my lad?"

"My police dog. Hughes was afraid of him, and that's why he tried to kick him out. It's lucky Mr. Orbit didn't see him; he never lets anything be hurt—"

The boy was replying courteously, in simple friendliness, when his father interrupted:

"Horace, it's time you got ready for lunch. Look at your hands!"

"That's paint, Dad; it won't come off, but I'll try again." He nodded, his wistful, sensitive face breaking into a smile and then went off down the hall while Goddard remarked:

"That boy of mine is crazy to be an artist and he runs next door now and then to see Orbit's paintings. Never took much stock in that sort of thing myself. Sorry I can't give you any further information about that valet, but I don't see why you should come to me, anyway!"

"Well, you've got the finest house on the block, except the closed-up one just over the way, and I supposed you'd know the folks that live in the others," McCarty explained. "Does any of them do anything but clip coupons?"

"We all know each other, of course." There was a softened note of genial patronage in his tone. "I don't know what it can have to do with your investigation but we're none of us what you would probably call the 'idle rich.' I manage several estates for relatives besides my own, Burminster over there works harder than any of his clerks, looking after his enormous holdings, Gardner Sloane—whom you met last night—is a prominent banker, Benjamin Parsons a philanthropist and Mrs. Bellamy's late husband was a broker. Orbit doesn't go in for finance, his money is all soundly invested, and I

don't believe he touches half his income, but his contributions to art and science and literature have been almost incalculable."

"Have they, so!" interjected McCarty, considerably impressed. "And are the Burminsters and the Parsons friends of Orbit, too?"

"The Burminsters, yes, but when I said we all knew each other here in the Mall I spoke generally. The Parsons are comparative strangers to all of us, although they have been here for two generations—no, three—Benjamin Parsons' young niece makes the third. No one here between these gates knows them."

"What's wrong with them?" McCarty demanded, adding with a very sober countenance: "Wasn't there time in the two generations to get acquainted?"

Goddard shrugged.

"Not in their estimation, evidently. From the beginning they held themselves aloof and made it plain that they wanted no social intercourse with the rest of us here; they live in a world of their own and for years none of us has tried to invade it. Orbit's newer than they—his father bought that house next door within my memory,—but he's a different sort."

"Yet you're not intimate with him, you tell me. Who are his close friends, informal-like? You'd know that, being his neighbor."

"I know nothing at all about Orbit's friends, and I fail to see what they'd have to do with his valet's murder!" Goddard flared out. "I've been pretty patient with you, but this is a confounded impertinence! Why don't you look up the associates of the fellow himself and not annoy us with such an affair? He was killed miles away from here in some vile slum, as I understand it; it's in-

sufferable that Orbit's neighbors should be dragged into your investigation!"

"Well, I'll be annoying you no longer just now," McCarty responded equably as he rose. "I'll just have a word with your help to put in my report, though, before I go."

Neither the butler nor the cook had any information of value to offer, however, and the maids employed upstairs gave equally valueless testimony. All had known Hughes by sight for years and had spoken to him occasionally in casual greeting but it was plain that they had not approved of him and were not particularly interested in his death.

"And them living next door to him for twenty years and more! 'Tis not in nature!" Dennis exclaimed, an hour later, when he and McCarty met by prearrangement at a modest East Side lunchroom and the latter disgustedly voiced his opinion of the apathetic Goddard staff. "There's no woman too old to be curious about a neighbor's sudden death, if it's only for the gossip of it! You didn't let on 'twas poison got him?"

"I did not! I told Goddard himself it was murder but he thinks somebody killed Hughes down there in what he calls a 'vile slum.'" McCarty paused to give their order to the slatternly waitress and then leaning his elbows on the table he asked eagerly: "What did you find out in the old precinct? Did you see Mike Taggart or Terry?"

"The both of them!" It was Dennis' turn to evince disgust. "Conceited young pups they are, the day! Terry's clean forgot he put Hughes down as an ordinary alcoholic case and Mike that he misread the tag on the key-ring, but they were having the laugh on you for see-

ing a man die of poison under your nose and not getting wise! They didn't laugh much, though, after I began asking about the old chop suey joints and Chink laundries!"

"So you spilled it, after all!" McCarty accused indignantly. "I might have known you would!"

"I spilled nothing but what I was told," retorted Dennis, with an underlying hint of dogged satisfaction in his tone. "'Twas not my fault they guessed, dumb as they are! They took it all in till I sprung that and even then Terry began telling me there was a laundry around the corner and a chop suey joint back on the next block but Mike broke in and asked me what the hell I was getting at; what did I know about the Chink that had been hanging around there not an hour before, and what in blazes you were up to now? Man, dear, 'twould have done your heart good to see the faces on them! I said you were foreclosing a mortgage out at Homevale, and 'twas themselves had spoke of the guy being poisoned, not me, and what Chink were they talking about? There was no fooling them then, though, they were wise, but Terry told me about the tall Chinaman with a face like a graven image who used good plain English even if he did sing it, and I knew it was Ching Lee, all right!"

"What about him?" McCarty demanded: "If he went to the station-house asking about Hughes when 'twas not even in the morning papers that the body'd been identified 'tis a wonder they didn't run him in on general principles!"

"Ching Lee is not that foolish!" Dennis lowered the knife, upon the end of which he had balanced a section of ham. "He told them he'd heard two other Chinks in that chop suey joint where he had his breakfast talking

about one of their own countrymen who had fallen down dead in front of the station house last night, and though the proprietor of the restaurant had said it was a white man, American, who had died, he had come there to make sure, being anxious about his brother.—Seems brother was to have met him the night before but didn't show up, or some such stall, and that he had a weak heart. Anyway, them two bright lads fell for it, told him the guy that croaked was white and I misdoubt but they let drop a hint that it was more than heart disease killed him. 'Twas only when I come around with my questions they began to see that maybe they'd pulled a bloomer.—Where the devil and all is our coffee?"

The coffee appeared and when they had finished it McCarty asked:

"What did you do then? You've not been all this long while kidding the boys at the house!"

"I have not," Dennis admitted with some complacency. "I left them looking like they'd got a comic valentine, and having time yet on my hands before I was to meet you I took a roundabout way to that chop suey joint, got a table hid behind the proprietor's desk and ordered some heathenish mess. The proprietor's a jolly, fat old Chink and I was trying to think up some way of bringing Ching Lee into our talk when who should come strolling in but Terry in plain clothes! He was off duty, of course, but he could not leave the matter be. The minute the old Chink lamped him he drew down his eyelids like the hood of an owl and pretended he couldn't understand English, but I was watching his face and I got wise that he knew Ching Lee all right! I could have laughed, thinking how he'd been jabbering to me but he fooled Terry and the lunkhead went away at last without even catching sight

of me behind the desk!—Give me that check and let's beat it."

They left the lunchroom and started westward again, McCarty seemingly lost in his own thoughts, until Dennis observed with a touch of impatience:

"I don't get the meaning of it at all! We know Ching Lee was ready to knife Hughes only yesterday and if he did slip that Calabar bean into his food the while him and Fu Moy was alone in their dining-room and then heard later from us that it had worked all right, you'd think he would just sit tight and wait for what was coming next instead of trailing down to the station-house to make himself conspicuous! Wasn't he the one that identified the body to us as being Hughes', and wouldn't he figger Terry and Mike would have been told of who the dead guy was, even if it hadn't come out in the morning papers? If he wanted to know whether the autopsy'd showed poison or not he'd only have had to wait for the next edition! Yet, when you had that hunch 'twas there he'd gone this morning you must have doped out that he had some good reason for it; what put the notion in your head to send me down there, Mac?"

But McCarty made strange answer.

"If he'd been in a hurry to get there he'd have took the subway over here." They were crossing Lexington Avenue, proceeding toward the Park. "Even if he'd walked it all the way he would have got down to the waterfront before nine, providing he took the most direct route, unless he stopped somewhere. He was in a hurry when he left the house but that might have been because of the storm coming; he was in no hurry to get where we found him, for all he was trying to run when he fell. Now what—?"

His voice trailed away into silence and his companion shrugged in exasperation.

" 'Tis like talking to the empty air to ask you a civil question these days, what with your new learning, but if you're asking me one, and it's about Hughes last night, I'll remind you of what you said coming over in the taxi; that maybe he wasn't bound for anywhere in particular but just wandering along, crazed by delirium and suffering. According to what the inspector told us concerning the action of that Calabar bean, he must have been in fierce pain before paralysis set in the lungs of him. It might have been then he stopped somewhere, though he could have been staggering and lurching around the streets for hours between the New Queen's Mall and the waterfront."

McCarty shook his head.

"If you'll call to mind, too, Denny, the inspector said the effect of the poison wouldn't be felt for maybe a couple of hours, the amount he'd took of it. It come on him sudden, and that when he was near the old precinct, and it worked quick to the end. I'm not making little of the inspector's power of persuasion but I wish we'd had the first shot at that Snape!—Look here, how much have you got on you?"

"Nine dollars and sixty-two cents." Dennis replied with the promptitude of certainty but he eyed the questioner askance.

"I'll get fifty for you before night. Thanks be, that sporting butler of Mrs. Bellamy's has never laid eyes on either of us, and you've the luck of Old Nick with the cards! Come evening, you'll be—"

"Come six o'clock this night I'll be on duty for twenty-four solid hours, if you'll remember!" Dennis interrupted,

regretfully but firmly. "If you were fixing for me to sit in a little game with Snape after scraping acquaintance with him, to find out maybe what the inspector overlooked I'd like nothing better, and I misdoubt but that if you take it on instead you'll be losing the clothes off your back! Could you not let it go till to-morrow night?"

The note of solicitude in his tone was lost upon McCarty in whose bosom the aspersion cast upon his poker ability rankled.

"If I'm losing the last stitch on me 'twill not be through playing close to my chest, like some!" he asserted darkly. "I was going back through the gate to have another talk with the Sloanes, if so be I'd find them in this time of day, but they'll keep, and I've a check-book and some letters in my pocket that may give us as good a line on Hughes as Snape himself could; besides, the inspector'll be dropping in for the good word. Come on till we hop a bus up to the cross-town."

Arriving before the entrance which led to McCarty's rooms they were astonished to see the door of the antique shop beside it open and the inspector himself emerge.

"Where have you two been?" he asked sharply. "I haven't time to go upstairs but unlock the door, Mac, and we'll step inside. Your friend Ballard of the 'Bulletin' has been hanging around; how in hell did he know you were in on this Hughes case?"

McCarty considerately forebore to glance at Dennis' chagrined countenance as he swung the door wide, but it was obvious to his own mind that the ubiquitous reporter must have been in touch with Mike or Terry at the station-house since his loyal but bungling assistant's visit of the morning.

"I don't know, sir," he replied innocently. "I've not

laid eyes on Jimmie this long while.—But what's up? I left you heading for Parsons' house; did you get any dope from the old man about the hat, maybe?"

"How did you know he was old?" Inspector Druet countered.

"Goddard was after telling me he was a philanthropist and youth don't turn to charity, as a rule," observed McCarty. "Moreover he's got a grown niece, and they've small use for any of their neighbors in spite of the millions around them."

"So I gathered," remarked the inspector dryly. "Parsons is a fine-looking old man with a face like a saint and a voice like a preacher, but he's stern and unbending as a ramrod! He could not recognize the hat and he knew no one in the New Queen's Mall; his sister took no interest in society, his niece had her own friends beyond the gates and he himself was engrossed in affairs which required all his time and attention. I figured the old gentleman would thaw when I said every one knew of the great good he'd done with his model tenements and playgrounds, and free hospital and shelters, but he shut me up as though I'd made a break and told me he was only a steward. He undoubtedly had seen the man, Hughes, if he'd been employed for twenty years or more in a house across the way, but he didn't recognize him and he'd never heard his name. Death by violence was a very dreadful thing and he only regretted his inability to aid the cause of justice."

"Was it the bunk, do you think, inspector?" Dennis asked. "Him talking like a book and all?"

The inspector shook his head.

"He's an old-fashioned gentleman, Riordan, the kind you don't often see nowadays, and his charities speak for

themselves for all that he doesn't celebrate them with a brass band. But it brought me no nearer to getting a line on Hughes, nor did the talk I had with his servants; they're not allowed to associate with any others on the block and had never talked to Hughes though they knew him by sight. There was one queer thing about that interview, though; I could swear that I'd seen one or two of them before but I couldn't place them."

"So you drew a blank in the Parsons house?" McCarty commented. "So did I at the Goddard's and as Denny says, 'tis not natural. The neighbors' help may not have liked Hughes, or be scared now of mixing up in this mess, but they're bound to have known him in all these years, whether they admit it or not."

"Then you have no sign of a clue?" The inspector's face lengthened. "If we don't clean this case up in record time the papers will let out a roar that we're lying down on the job because Hughes wasn't a person of prominence, and with election so near the commissioner'll be up on his toes to show results. It's of more importance now for us to find out who killed that valet than if he were a king!"

CHAPTER VII

GERTIE

WHEN the inspector had left them McCarty and Dennis mounted to the apartment above and together looked over the bank-book and check-book appropriated from beneath the rug in Hughes' room.

The first showed a regular deposit of one hundred and fifty dollars on the first of every month with varying sums between, ranging from twenty to just under a hundred, but balanced it invariably revealed only a comparatively small amount on hand.

"If the one hundred and fifty means his wages, he got mighty high ones." Dennis remarked. "Still, Orbit looks like the kind who'd pay anything if he was suited and he said Hughes was a perfect valet, if you remember. The money deposited during the month might be his winnings at the races or cards and he was a lucky son-of-a-gun, but he seems to have lived up to nearly every cent."

"Or lost it back again," suggested McCarty. "Let's have a look at the check-book."

The stubs in the latter were not illuminating, for the dead man had evidently evolved a method of his own for noting those to whom he assigned checks and only hieroglyphics designated them. Laying aside this disappointing record McCarty turned to the little pile of letters which he had taken from the drawer of Hughes' dresser and passed a handful to his companion.

"Here, Denny, sort these," he directed. "You can tell by the writing if not by the names signed to them. If they're love letters from women the more fools they, and 'tis no time to be squeamish!"

For a brief space there was silence, except for the rustle of paper and an occasional shocked exclamation from the scandalized Dennis, but at last he glanced up with a look of wonderment and exclaimed:

"Don't it beat hell how much alike they are, all of them?"

"Who are?" McCarty asked absently.

"Women!" Dennis waved a huge paw in a vaguely comprehensive gesture. "American or foreign,—and you can tell the last by the strange words they put in when they can't think of the English of them,—they all begin writing to him as if they was doing him a favor, the scoundrel! After a bit they start bossing him, and nagging and fault-finding, then they throw a bluff at 'good-by forever,' and the last of it's always the same; begging him to come back! 'Tis well for us, Mac, that we've steered clear of them, for the both of us would have been wax in their hands!"

"Speak for yourself!" McCarty retorted. "No living woman could make a mark of me, though I'm giving none a chance! 'Tis funny they'd fall for a beefy, middle-aged guy like that, though, with the little mean eyes of him and the bald spot and all!"

"There's no telling what they'll take to!" asserted Dennis darkly. "There's only one sensible female in the lot here; this one signing herself 'Truda.' She tells him kind but firm to stop writing to her or it'll bring trouble to the two of them and it's all damn' foolishness, anyway."

"She said that?" demanded McCarty.

"Not in those words, maybe; I've put it shorter and better than she does," Dennis admitted modestly. "It looks as if she goes out sick-nursing or something, but she's a married woman, all right."

" 'Married?' " McCarty dropped the letter he had just taken up. " 'Truda' might stand for 'Gertrude,' and 'Gertie' is short for the same name. I wonder now could she be 'Gertie'?"

"And who in the world is Gertie?" Dennis stared. "Have you been holding out on me, Mac?"

"I have not. Snape told the inspector this morning that Hughes was crazy over some married woman named Gertie, but that's all he knew about her. Read the letters, Denny."

"There's only two of them." Dennis spread out the thin, double sheet of folded note-paper. "Listen, then: this is the first, for 'tis dated August twenty-second.— 'Dear friend Alfred. I was surprised and very pleased with the so pretty flowers you send to me, but please, you should not do it any more. I no longer am a girl, that I could accept such things and also he would be so angry to know. He is still there but you have not seen him for some days because the old gentleman of whom he takes care has been much worser. To me he has not come, even, but soon he will and my lady always talks to him when she is well enough, she takes interest for him to learn English more quicker. I got fear she speaks to him of the pretty flowers, for I tell her they come from him, and so it makes troubles for you and me, the both. Because of that, though I thank you for the so kind thought, I ask that you send no more. Your very true friend, Truda.' "

"Humph! Truda ain't so strong on the English her-

self, is she?" McCarty remarked. "Sounds like a Dutch girl to me, or one of those squareheads. I wonder where her husband could be working that Hughes expected to see him? Anyway, it's him and not her does the sick-nursing, Denny."

"The both of them do!" Dennis declared. "Wait'll you hear the second letter.—'Dear friend. I could not meet you as you wish for my lady is not so well and I do not leave her bed, but also I would not. It is much silliness that you write me and you should not do it again once. You are making yourself amused with me and I got anger you should keep sending the letters I do not want and that could harm us both yet. He is not stupid and mild like you think. Nothing he says but much he thinks, and then it comes out and terrible is it. So you will not write again, nor try that I should see you. Your friend, Truda.'"

"She's Dutch, all right, and level-headed. Hughes must have had the fine opinion of himself as a lady-killer, to be chasing after a respectable married woman that wanted nothing to do with the likes of him!" McCarty snorted. "I'll bet Snape knows who she is and the husband, too, only he's scared to speak now."

"Mac, do you mind what Orbit told us about that Calabar bean being used as a medicine? Besides a doctor, who'd know more about medicines and poisons and such than a trained nurse?" Dennis' leathery countenance was flushed with sudden excitement. "Hughes thought Truda's husband was a dull-witted lout, with no more spirit than a sick cat, but *she* says he's terrible when he gets going, and she'd ought to know! What if he got on to them letters and being a foreigner with little or no English—!"

"Denny!" McCarty gazed wide-eyed at his confrère. "By the powers, I wonder if you've hit it! If Snape's held anything back he'll come across with it now! Are you sure there are no more 'Truda' letters except the two?"

"Not here, but you've not gone through all yours yet." Dennis reminded him.

McCarty fell upon the few that remained and running hastily over them seized on one with an exclamation of satisfaction. It died upon his lips as he ran his eye down the page and then glanced up at Dennis' tense face.

"Listen you to this!" he said impressively. "'Tis short but tells more than the other two put together.—'Friend Alfred Hughes. To you I have tried to be kind but it is not good. Now I say that if you should write again I shall tell it to my husband that you are made to stop. He knows already you bother me, but comes any more letters and he will the street go over to make of you sausage meat. It is enough. Truda L.'—And 'tis dated just four days ago! Do you get it, Denny?"

"Only that the husband works near, but we learned that much before—"

"'Near?'" McCarty interrupted. "He's across the street! Didn't Sloane say his old father was an invalid with a male nurse that was a Swede and spoke little English? Come on! It's back we'll be going to the New Queen's Mall!"

Dennis was overwhelmed with the importance of their discovery and ventured only one question when they stood again at the entrance gate.

"How'll we start in on him?"

"On who?"

"The Swede at Sloane's. We'll have to find out first if his last name begins with 'L.'"

"I'm not going near him, not till I've found and talked to this Truda. It's Snape I'm after and I'll be leaving you outside the gate, Denny, for maybe you'll be scraping acquaintance with him to-morrow, after all."

Bill Jennings admitted him and stopped for a word with Dennis, while McCarty went quickly to the Bellamy house and rang the bell. The door was opened promptly by a tall, slenderly erect man of thirty-five or a trifle more, with the strongly marked features and intelligent, self-contained expression of an actor. The slight puffiness about the slate-gray eyes and fine lines at the corners of his mouth were the only evidences of the possible dissipation of which the watchman Jennings had spoken. He waited with an aloof but courteous air of inquiry to learn the visitor's errand.

"You're the butler here? Snape is your name?"

"Yes, sir," the man replied with no hint of surprise in his tone but his eyes narrowed and a certain touch of deference vanished from his manner.

"I'm a special deputy, headquarters." McCarty showed the old badge which he had resurrected just before leaving his rooms with Dennis. "Inspector Druet thought you forgot one or two things this morning that you might have had time to remember by now. Where can we talk private?"

Snape hesitated for a minute and then stepped aside for McCarty to enter.

"Come this way." He closed the door, and, turning, started down the hall toward the rear, with McCarty at his heels. The butler led his unwelcome guest through a door opening into the domestic quarters of the establish-

ment and to a plainly but comfortably appointed dining-room where he motioned to a chair at the table and seated himself in another opposite.

"What can I do for you?" His tone was brisk but not truculent, and McCarty, too, came to the point without preamble.

"You can tell me the address where Truda's working now, taking care of the sick woman."

" 'Truda?' " Snape frowned, as though perplexed, and McCarty assumed an air of impatience.

"Oh, you know her! 'Gertie,' Hughes may have called her to you, but Truda is the name she signs to her letters and she mentions you in them."

"Me?" Snape smile incredulously. "There's a mistake somewhere. I don't know any one by either name."

"You spoke of her first to the inspector this morning."

"I said Hughes had mentioned a girl named Gertie that he was taken with, in a manner of speaking, but I didn't know anything more about her except just the name, though from what he said I had a notion that she was a married party." Snape coughed discreetly. "I told the inspector Hughes and I had a bit of diversion together now and then, but nothing to do with women. He was always running after one or another of them and I never paid much attention to what he told me about them, but in the case of this 'Gertie' he did say there was somebody in the way, and I supposed he meant a husband."

"You know well there was a husband and you'd not need the strength of a child to throw a stone right now and hit him!" McCarty retorted. "She's respectable, with no use for Hughes and his nonsense, and it was to save her trouble, since he's dead and out of it, that I came to

you for her address instead of going across the street and giving her away to the man she's married to. Of course, if you can't recall Hughes mentioning it to you I've no choice."

He made as if to rise and Snape wet his thin lips nervously.

"I have my place to consider." There was a slight whine in his tone. "How do I know that the 'Truda' you speak of is the same—!"

"Come across if you're going to!" McCarty interrupted with the harsh, commanding bark of the old days. "You know damn' well that if I go over to the Sloanes' and tell her husband 'twas you first wised us up that Hughes and his wife—"

"I never said Otto Lindholm's wife was the woman Hughes was taken with!" A sullen note had replaced the whine. "I said it was somebody named 'Gertie' and there could be a million Gerties! The one he knew might be companion to an invalid up on the Drive; a Mrs. Cochrane, who has a private house in the neighborhood of Eightieth Street, somewhere, but it's not for me to say. Hughes talked about so many—"

He paused with a shrug and McCarty asked quickly:

"When was the last time you saw Otto Lindholm?"

"The night before last—Thursday,—about eleven o'clock. We met at the east gate coming in."

"What did he have to say to you?"

"Nothing much. He's too thick-headed to learn English and he don't say two words to anybody." Snape spoke with lazy contempt, but there was an undercurrent of antagonism which McCarty recognized.

"He had a few words with you, though, didn't he? What are you and him on bad terms about?"

"I don't even know him, except to nod to when we meet!" Snape disclaimed. "He's a surly customer and never had any use for Hughes even before—"

He checked himself but it was too late.

"Before Thursday night, eh? So Hughes was with you when you met outside the gate?" McCarty pounced on him like a flash. "What passed between the three of you? I want every word."

"Oh, well, Lindholm just said 'hello' to me and then he stepped up to Hughes and growled something about letting his wife alone or he'd fix him. That's all I know, I can't repeat his lingo. Hughes blustered it out and Lindholm went on in ahead of us muttering to himself, when Dave Hollis opened the gate. I didn't want to say anything about it, because of getting the woman into trouble, but what's all this got to do with Hughes' death?" The gray eyes lighted shrewdly. "You fellows think there was something wrong or you wouldn't be raising all this row over it. Nobody had it in for him bad enough to do him any hurt, and the papers said nothing about his having been beat up! You don't think he was murdered, do you?"

The amused insolence in the man's voice was only slightly veiled. McCarty concluded that if he were putting it on he was indeed a smooth proposition, as the inspector had said.

"Nobody beat him up." He ignored the final question. "Do you know any of the other help over at the Sloanes'?"

"Only John Platt, the butler, but he's old and hardly leaves the house." Snape had risen with alacrity, but as he showed McCarty to the front door he added anxiously: "I never even saw the Lindholm woman but once, and I

don't know what you want her for, but I hope you won't say that I tipped you off about her! I don't want to get in any mix-up with that Swede husband of hers and it would be as much as my place is worth, if I was thought to have made trouble in the Mall here!"

On the sidewalk before the house McCarty found an exceedingly pretty young girl in the picturesque dress of the typical French bonne, guiding the steps of a tiny, toddling baby. The child was dimpling and gurgling with mischief. Snatching suddenly at her nurse's handbag she tossed it as far out on the sidewalk as she could. McCarty retrieved and returned it with a bow.

"Merci, monsieur," the girl said gravely, but her dark eyes too danced with laughter. "She is a very naughty, bad baby that I have here, is it not so?"

The last observation was evidently intended for her charge, but McCarty replied gallantly:

" 'Twas a pleasure, miss! Sure, at that age they're all full of the—of life. It's Mrs. Bellamy's little girl, isn't it?"

"Yes, Monsieur." Her eyes were serious now and there was a note of reserve in her soft voice. "Come, *ma petite.* We shall go in now."

Dennis was waiting patiently and evinced considerable interest in the brief tête-à-tête he had just witnessed, but McCarty was not in a mood to be treated with levity.

"She's a pretty girl and a polite one, but well you know I've no eye for them!" he disclaimed. "I'll be taking you now to call on another, though, that'll maybe give us some real dope."

"It's Truda!" exulted Dennis. "You've made him come across with her address! Did you get anything else out of him, Mac?"

"Only that there was bad blood between her husband, that nurses at the Sloanes', and Hughes." McCarty repeated the tale of the encounter and his companion's face expressed satisfaction.

" 'Twill be him, all right!" he predicted sagely. "Them silent, slow-thinking fellows are the worst! Where'd he get hold of that Calabar bean stuff and how'd he slip it to Hughes?"

"And why didn't I go and pinch him right off the bat instead of taking this little trip?" McCarty supplemented sarcastically, as they boarded an uptown car. "There's more than him and that wall-eyed Chink that had it in for Hughes, but we'll see what his wife has to say."

A telephone book, in a drug-store on Eightieth Street, vouchsafed them the house number of the only Cochranes on Riverside Drive. They found the place to be a small, solidly built residence of gray stone with potted evergreens flanking the turn of the steps to the entrance door.

A trim little maid with a coquettishly frilled apron admitted them to a foyer, arranged informally as a library or den, with seats built in at either side of the empty hearth and books ranged along the opposite wall behind a long table. There she left them and presently slow, soft footsteps sounded on the stairs and another woman appeared.

She was thirty or thereabout, with thick braids of coarse, pale-gold hair wound around a small, shapely head, and a face whose perfect features would have rendered it beautiful had it been lighted with intelligence; but the great blue eyes were dull and bovine, and, although the rich color came and went in her cheeks, there was no hint of expression beyond vaguely bewildered inquiry as she bowed.

"I am Mrs. Lindholm. The maid say that you wish to see me."

"Yes, ma'am." Dennis was gaping in flagrant admiration at the vision, but McCarty stepped forward. "We've come to return something that belongs to you."

He handed her the first two letters which she had written to the dead man and watched her face as she recognized them. A shadow of dismay darkened her eyes and a little frown gathered above them.

"Oh, for why did he keep them?" Her tone was distressed but without agitation. "Such a nuisance as he was, poor man! Where did you get these?"

"Amongst his things." McCarty drew a step nearer. "You know he is dead then?"

"Alfred Hughes? Yes, this morning in the papers I see it. So sudden it was! You are his friends, maybe?" She folded the letters and slipped them into the belt of her starched, white nurse's uniform. "Sit down, please. I cannot long stay away from my patient."

"We're taking charge of Alfred Hughes' belongings and arranging with Mr. Orbit for the funeral." McCarty explained speciously, as they complied. "You and him were good friends, weren't you?"

Truda Lindholm shook her blonde head slowly.

"No. I meet him by accident when I go to see my husband, who works across the street from Mr. Orbit's, and then he waits for me two—three times. If you have read these letters you must know he gets a foolishness in his mind to make a flirtation with me, but it did not please me. He is gone now, poor soul, and so we do not talk about that, no?"

"But you did talk about it, didn't you, Mrs. Lindholm?" asked McCarty. "You told your husband?"

"Oh, yes, it is right that I tell *him.*" Her eyes opened wider, but there was no trace of confusion in her tone. "Already I told him that Alfred Hughes followed me, and once he and that friend of his who works next door, they want I should go to a dance with them. Such a nonsense, a married woman! I think it is joost silly but Otto is angry and so I do not tell him any more."

She spoke with the naïve candor of a child. McCarty continued:

"You did tell him when Hughes wouldn't stop writing to you, though. When did you see your husband last, Mrs. Lindholm? Thursday evening, was it?"

"Thursday, yes. It is then I tell him. I am tired that I should be bothered and I think he shall speak to Alfred Hughes, but now I am sorry."

"Why?" Dennis found his voice all at once, and the woman turned a glance of calm wonder upon him.

"That my Otto should be for nothing worried? So much to heart he takes things, and now it makes no difference. You do not think, please, that I am without feeling about the so unfortunate death of your friend. It makes me shocked and sad to read of it, but death is always sad. Thank you much for my letters, it was a foolishness that they were not sooner destroyed.—And now I must go to Mrs. Cochrane. You will excuse me?"

She rose, and Dennis and McCarty followed suit, but the latter shook his head.

"Just a minute, ma'am. Was it here you saw your husband on Thursday?"

"Yes, he came to see me. But what is this? Why do you ask?" Surprise raised her rather flat tones a note or two.

"Because I want to know just what passed between you two about our friend Alfred Hughes." McCarty responded doggedly. "Have you heard from your husband since?"

"He telephoned to me yesterday." The color ebbed slowly from her cheeks, then swept back in a deep flood and she clasped her hands. "Oh, do you mean that there was trouble between them? A quarrel? Ach, such a pity! Otto comes to me about nine o'clock Thursday night. Two days before I have still another letter received from your friend asking that I should meet him and I am angry; I write to him that I shall tell my husband and so I do when he comes, for I still got anger. Otto, he gets a worser mad on and he wants he should go then to Alfred Hughes, but I say to wait, maybe comes no more letters and then there is no troubles. From Bavaria I come but my husband is Swedish and such a temper he has! Sometimes I think I do not know him and six years I am married already! We say no more of Alfred Hughes and I think Otto has forgotten—did he go yet and make bad friends with him?"

"I guess they had some words, ma'am, but it don't matter now as you say." McCarty was watching her with a feeling of growing wonder on his own account. Could the woman be as stupid as she seemed? Hughes had evidently been less than nothing to her, she was apparently devoted to her husband and still—in McCarty's own mental phraseology—giving him a blacker eye every time she opened her mouth.

"But it is bad luck that one should be unfriends with the dead!" She shook her head and made a little clucking noise with her teeth. "The fault is mine that I should so quickly have spoken, for Alfred Hughes got

only the foolishness in his head to make a joke; not a bad man was he!"

"Well, it's done with now and that's the end of it." McCarty signaled to his colleague with a quick glance. "We won't be keeping you any longer from your patient. Is it a very hard case you've got?"

"It is the nerves and heart." A still gentler note crept into the dull tones. "Mrs. Cochrane has got much sorrow; her little boy she has lost less than a month ago."

"Too bad!" McCarty sympathized absent-mindedly. "What did he die of?"

"Of tetanus."

Dennis started.

"Is it catching?" he asked nervously. "Could you get it after?"

A little smile dimpled Truda Lindholm's smooth cheek.

"Oh, no. Comes it from the scratch of a rusty nail, sometimes, and causes the jaws to set rigid, to lock."

"Lockjaw!" Dennis stared for a moment and then his own lower jaw snapped. "Come along, Mac! There's a date we'll be missing!"

CHAPTER VIII

GATES OF MYSTERY

THEY argued hotly all the way back to the New Queen's Mall, Dennis convinced that his prediction was already verified and McCarty combating the idea from force of habit as much as from any other urge, although he felt that the indications were too vague as yet, the clues too tenuous, to be woven into a fabric of proof.

"What's it that this Otto had a few words with him?" he demanded as they reached the west gate on the Avenue. "Ching Lee went further than that with a knife! Because Truda is working now in a house where a child died of the lockjaw, and Calabar bean is one of the cures they try for it, you've got it all fixed that Otto laid hold of some of it there, or Truda gave it to him, and he must needs have gone over the way and sprinkled enough of it on Hughes' dinner, unbeknownst to any one, to kill him! 'Tis well you took to fire-fighting, Denny, instead of following me on the Force!"

"Is it so!" Dennis retorted. "I'm still on my job, let me remind you, though maybe 'tis well you resigned when you did, if you can't see further than the end of your own nose, that you couldn't even smell with last night! Who else on the block has been within a mile of a case of lockjaw, and for what else would that powdered bean be left lying around? Swede or Chink, a man's a man, though you might pick up a knife or a blackthorn, which-

ever was handiest, to go for a bully you saw abusing a kid it would be in hot rage; 'twould take something bigger than that to make you sit down, cool and calm, and figure out how to poison him! But a jealous husband might, and didn't Otto threaten to 'fix' Hughes, by the words out of Snape's mouth? That Truda don't suspicion a thing, but then she'd not know it if a powder factory took fire next door! 'Tis a crime of nature that such a grand-looking woman should be so dumb!"

"We've another kind of a crime on our hands, I'd remind you," McCarty observed. "Where on earth is that Bill Jennings?"

He rang once more and Dennis pointed through the grill-work of the fence.

"There he is, clear at the other end of the block, letting another guy out of the east gate. They've walled themselves in fine, the folks that live here, but they could not shut out age, nor sickness, nor murder! Good-afternoon, sir!"

Immaculate in frock coat and tall silk hat, the elder of the two Sloanes, whom they had encountered on the previous evening, had swung briskly down the Avenue to their side. He appeared, for the moment, oblivious to Dennis' salutation, as he fumbled with his gold pince-nez and stared down the vista of the enclosed street.

"Confound it! What's the fellow mean—?" Then he drew himself up and turned to the couple near. "Oh, you're the men from Headquarters! Still on that affair of Orbit's valet?—I've forgotten my key again; such a bore!"

"There, the watchman's seen us; he's coming on the run." McCarty nudged his companion and then added

to Gardner Sloane: "We've been talking to the other servants on the block, but we haven't been to your house yet since you said only your butler and the trained nurse would be likely to have known Hughes."

"Unless I'm mistaken that was Lindholm the nurse going out the other gate just now!" Sloane fumed. "Wretched impudence, his leaving my father like this without permission. It always gives him a bad turn to be left alone. But what's all this to do about the valet's death? Nothing actually suspicious about it, was there? Silly rot, having an investigation of this sort in the Mall!"

Bill Jennings pounded heavily up and admitted them at this juncture, preventing the necessity of a reply from McCarty, who was carefully avoiding Dennis' stare of dismayed inquiry.

"Yes, sir, that was Otto Lindholm," the watchman answered Sloane's irascible query. "He remarked to me that he was called away sudden for a few days."

"I am not interested in his remarks! He shall be dismissed for this!" Sloane strode off angrily, without taking further notice of the two who had followed him, and Dennis plucked McCarty's sleeve.

"We've lost him!" he exclaimed disconsolately. "That wife of his may not have been so dumb, after all, if she's 'phoned and put him wise!"

"Let be!" McCarty cautioned. "Bill, did Lindholm say where he was going? He must have been called away mighty quick, for we had a kind of a date with him."

"He didn't say, but he looked more glum than usual; seemed in a hurry, too." Bill turned and then waited as they did not advance.

"Well, it's no matter, anyway. We were to pick up the inspector but I guess he's gone on downtown. We'll be beating it ourselves, Denny."

Outside the gates once more, Dennis observed:

"Likely the woman's gone, too, and it's near six. I'll have to be getting back to the fire-house to report, but you'll let me know if you locate them? No matter when or how he contrived to dose Hughes with that poison it must have been Lindholm, for his skipping out proves it! To think of them two dumb-bells, the man and the woman, being at the bottom of it!"

McCarty shook his head.

" 'Twas not a crime of brawn, Denny, but of brains, and I'm thinking the one clever enough to plan it would be too farseeing to run away before he'd real reason. I'll drop 'round to-morrow morning if there's any news."

On the west side of the park they separated, Dennis to take up his duty and McCarty to return to the Cochrane house. As the former had predicted, Truda Lindholm had departed hurriedly half an hour before, after a telephone conversation during which she had learned of serious illness in her own family. The same trim maid who opened the door at their first visit was McCarty's informant and she couldn't say from whom the message had come, but she added that Mrs. Lindholm seemed more distressed at leaving her patient than anxious over her own trouble. She had been there nearly a month, since just after Mrs. Cochrane's little boy died, and had come well recommended from the West End registry for nurses; they had all liked her.

At the registry office McCarty obtained an address in the Bronx, only to learn from the Swedish couple living there that Mr. and Mrs. Lindholm had boarded with

them up to a month before, but had left, giving the Sloane house as a forwarding address.

He ate a solitary dinner and then returned to his rooms, to meditate disgustedly over the negative result of the day's efforts. Hughes' murder challenged his every instinct and habit of mind. If Ching Lee knew nothing of it, what impulse had taken him that morning to the scene of the crime's consummation? Were Lindholm and his wife both stupid enough to have taken alarm at the first hint of investigation, if they were innocent, and so deserted their responsible positions? Had Snape really told all he knew?

McCarty chewed savagely on his unlighted cigar, as he paced back and forth. How would the bright lads in the new scientific school of criminal psychology down at headquarters get after the mystery? With a concrete example before him, would those books he had vainly pored over give him a hint now? Dubiously he resurrected his newly-acquired collection from the depths of his closet and then paused at sight of the pale blue covered pamphlet protruding from the pocket of the coat hanging above. It was the book he had appropriated from Orbit's library the night before, because it seemed to have something about psychology in it that a fellow could get through his head. Now he sat himself down doggedly to study it, with his own library scattered about him.

It was dawn before he went to bed at last, with the unaltered conviction that this new school was not for him and that if he were to succeed at all it must be by the wits God gave him, which, he had once told Dennis, were his only science.

Yet Sunday passed and Monday; Hughes was laid to

rest in the grave provided for him by his late employer, and still there was no inkling of his murderer's identity. Ching Lee blandly declared he had been to Chinatown on the morning after the tragedy and offered to produce numerous relations to prove it. No slightest trace could be found of the Lindholms; and Snape kept sedulously to the Bellamy house, affording Dennis no opportunity to foster an acquaintance. The newspapers were already criticizing the police department, Inspector Druet smarted under the recriminations from higher up, and Dennis lugubriously predicted defeat.

"The truth of it will never come out, Mac, with them Lindholms disappearing and all," he remarked on Tuesday afternoon, as they walked slowly down the Mall toward Orbit's house. "Maybe if we could get a line on Hughes' actions from the time he left here and the way he took down to where he died—?"

"I've taken a dozen different routes trying to get trace of somebody who might have noticed him when he first took sick to see did he give a hint to them of what he was wanting to say when the end came, but 'tis no matter of use," McCarty interrupted gloomily. "You said the first night we set foot in here that 'twould be small mystery could last for long between these two gates and yet it's within a space where you could swing a cat that the answer lies; that's what gets my goat! I want to have another talk with Orbit. He's late getting in his coal, ain't he?"

The roar of coal sliding down a chute from a huge truck beside the door almost drowned his comment, but Dennis nodded.

"Look at them two guys working like blazes shoving it down the hole quicker, and Jean waiting with the hose

to clean the sidewalk after." He pointed. "Orbit must be going to give some sort of a shindy, for isn't that a red carpet and an awning piled up alongside the door? You'll be out of luck if you're wanting to interview him again this afternoon."

"No. There he is up in the window of his own private sitting-room, so don't be pointing, Denny! He's doing something to the flowers."

By daylight the front of the classic white marble house was a blaze of gorgeous color from the window boxes on each sill filled with blooms of vivid but perfectly blended hue, with graceful vines trailing in slender, artfully trained tendrils down over the gleaming walls.

In one of the windows on the second floor the tall figure of Henry Orbit appeared, the delicate touch of silver in his dark hair plainly visible as he bent forward, and when he caught sight of the two below he inclined his head in dignified but amicable greeting.

"We'll go to him now?" Denny asked.

"After we stroll down to the other gate and back. Did it strike you that there's no sign of Bill Jennings on the block?" At the insistence of the inspector they had been temporarily provided with a key to the Mall, rendering them independent of the offices of either day or night watchman, but until now they had invariably encountered one or the other of these guardians.

"Maybe he's having a bit of a chat with a maid in one of the houses," Dennis suggested helpfully. "There's small blame to him, for it must be mortal tiresome—"

"It looks to me as if the gate was open." McCarty insensibly quickened his steps. "Come on, I want to see."

The gate was swinging slightly ajar, but the passing

pedestrians on Madison Avenue gave it no heed and the delinquent watchman was nowhere in evidence.

"Let's shut it." Dennis turned to his companion. "Bill's a good fellow and there's no need of getting him into trouble with the lords of creation like that Sloane if he's just stepped out for a bit. He'll have his own key to let himself in and these gates are damn' foolishness, anyway."

"He's breaking a rule if not a law, Denny, and we've no call to be condoning it for him." McCarty's years of discipline returned to him. "We'll be minding our own business, and get back to Orbit's now."

"Bill can't have gone far, knowing that coal-truck will have to be let out in a few minutes," Dennis averred. "'Tis almost empty now and I'll bet those guys got a tip from Orbit, to be working that fast! He's moved to the other window now."

Ching Lee admitted them, impassive as ever. Their call was evidently anticipated, for he conducted them at once up to the private study. Orbit turned from the window with an inquiring glance and they saw that he held in his hand an oddly-shaped, silver-mounted sprayer.

"Have you any news for me?" he asked quickly.

"Nothing definite yet. But don't let us bother you, Mr. Orbit; I just wanted to ask you a question or two."

"Glad to tell you anything, of course. I am just spraying the flowers to rid them of any particles of coal dust which may have floated up." Orbit turned again to the window as he spoke. "It is a pity that such a hideous utilitarian necessity should mar their perfection, but the truck is going now."

The rumble of the heavy vehicle arose from below as he spoke. Stepping to the other window, McCarty saw that

the familiar figure of Bill Jennings was waiting once more by the eastern gate which he had thrown wide.

"You're having a party later, Mr. Orbit?"

"A musicale. Giambattista is to appear and my guests will arrive in an hour. The unfortunate delay in putting in the coal—but what did you wish to ask me? I would have recalled the invitations if I could for I am in little mood for a function; the mystery surrounding the death of poor Hughes is more disturbing than anything I have known for years and I am waiting anxiously for it to be solved."

He came forward again, replacing the sprayer in its case, and seated himself in the chair beside his writing table.

"Well, it was quite a bit of money Hughes left for a fellow that threw it around like he did and the inspector dropped a hint of it to the newspaper boys so if anybody thought they could fake a claim they'd show themselves. He wants to know if you've been approached?"

Dennis stared in amazement at this unexpected departure but Orbit shook his head.

"I have heard nothing from any claimant in this country or his own, but I have instructed my attorneys to cable to Cornwall, not only for Hughes' heirs but to ascertain if any close relatives of his are in actual want. I feel that it is the least I can do after twenty years of efficient service."

"You've not replaced him yet?"

Orbit shrugged.

"That would be well-nigh impossible to do. A new man is coming in a few days, highly recommended by a friend, but he will not be another Hughes. . . . What is it, Ching Lee?"

He had taken a cigarette from an ivory box on the table and he paused with it midway to his lips as the butler appeared in the doorway.

"The tutor, Mr. Trafford, sir. He desires to know if Master Horace is here."

" 'Here?' " Orbit raised his eyebrows. "No. I haven't seen the little chap since he passed this morning with Mr. Trafford. You might ask Fu Moy or Jean if they have seen him."

"Very good, sir."

Ching Lee inclined his head and departed, as silently as he had come. Orbit lighted his cigarette and leaned back.

"You've no definite clue yet, you say? None of Hughes' associates, whoever they may have been, can suggest any reason for such a purposeless crime as this appears?"

"We're looking for more of his associates, Mr. Orbit. The gentlemen who've visited you here—the most of them brought their own valets with them, didn't they?"

"Naturally." Orbit nodded and blew a smoke ring thoughtfully into the air.

"Hughes may have grown thick with some of them, though you'd not be likely to know of it. I'd like a list as near as you can remember of the gentlemen who have stayed here during the past year, say, so we can look up their servants."

"I can tell you offhand of several of my guests but it will take more time than I can spare this afternoon to give you a complete list, and frankly, it is distasteful to me to have my friends annoyed." Orbit's tone was pleasant but firm. "The latest to visit me, whom I can recall, are Professor Harrowden, from the Smithsonian Institute,

Sir Philip Devereux and Conan Fairclough of London, Sabatiano Maura, Yareslow Gazdik—"

"Mr. Orbit, would you write the last two?" McCarty interrupted earnestly. "Where might Professor Harrowden be found?"

"In South America just now, leading an expedition up the Amazon." Orbit laid his cigarette in a tray of curiously hammered red gold and reached obligingly for a pen. "Fairclough's off for Africa again, I believe, and Gazdik is playing a series of concerts at Biarritz."

"Are the others at the ends of the earth, too?" The question was bland, but McCarty's smile was a trifle grim.

"Oh, no!" Orbit smiled also in understanding, as he rose and offered the sheet of paper. "Sir Philip is on his way here from the West to visit me again for a few days and Maura's portrait exhibition closes in Philadelphia before the end of the month when he, too, will return before sailing again for Madrid. I'll send the complete list to headquarters for you, but I'm afraid you won't find that their menservants learned much of Hughes' affairs in the brief time they were here."

McCarty thanked him and they took their departure, encountering Ching Lee in the hall below who showed them out in silence.

" 'Tis beyond me what you got out of that interview," Dennis declared. "Stalling, is what I'd have called it!"

"The two of us!" McCarty agreed with a chuckle. "Him as well as me. He'll not be dragging his friends into this business if he can help it! . . . Who's the lanky, worried-looking guy talking to Bill?"

Halfway down the block, a tall, thin, bespectacled

young man was gesticulating nervously as he confronted the watchman whose vehement shakes of the head denoted protestation. While they watched, the young man turned abruptly and made for the Goddard house. Bill advanced slowly toward them.

"Have you fellows seen the Goddard boy?" he asked. "He's the red-headed kid you saw me let in the first day you came. That was his private teacher who's been looking for him for an hour but he didn't go out either of the gates."

"Maybe he did awhile back when that one was left open," McCarty suggested dryly.

"Good Lord, did you know that!" Bill gasped. "If you let on it'll cost me my job, and I only stepped 'round the corner for a smoke! The kid's all right, but they treat him like a baby. Did you find out yet who killed Hughes?"

"We're waiting for news every minute," McCarty assured him gravely as they reached the western gate. "I shouldn't wonder if it came to-night."

"Now what in the world did you give him that bunk for?" demanded Dennis, when they had left the Mall safely behind them.

"I said 'news,' but not of what kind, Denny," replied his companion with dignity. "You're not on duty till morning?"

"No, I was thinking I'd drop in at Molly's, now the kid has got over the measles."

"Well, come to my rooms when you leave your sister's," McCarty invited. "I've accepted a bribe from one of my Homevale tenants, who's law-breaking in his cellar, and if you're not afraid of being poisoned like Hughes——?"

"I'll be there!" Dennis promised with alacrity.

He was as good as his word but when he arrived no refreshment awaited him. Instead, McCarty turned from the telephone with a glint of latent excitement in his blue eyes and announced:

"The news has come, Denny. Horace Goddard has been kidnapped!"

CHAPTER IX

IN THIN AIR

"GLAD you could come at once, McCarty." Eustace Goddard's ruddy face was pale, and the humorous quirk beneath the ends of the small, sandy mustache had given place to a tremulous droop." Your inspector thought I had some information for you about that valet's death when I telephoned headquarters to ask for your address and I didn't undeceive him. Don't want any notoriety about this while a shadow of doubt remains—but God! I—I'm worried!"

"You'll recall Special Deputy Riordan from that first talk we had at Orbit's?" McCarty indicated his colleague who stood in the doorway. "You told me over the 'phone that your boy had been kidnapped; he's pretty big for that, ain't he, and in broad day?"

"What else can we think?" Goddard threw out his arms in a helpless gesture. "Horry vanished in thin air this afternoon! He hadn't any idea of going out, in fact, he complained of a headache after lunch—he has never been very strong—and his mother left him curled up on the couch in the library here when she went shopping. She returned late to dress for Orbit's musicale and didn't inquire for him, supposing him to be with Trafford, his tutor. I reached home from the club about half-past five and found Trafford very much disturbed—But here he is! He'll tell you himself. Mr. Trafford, these are the

men for whom I sent. Will you tell them when you first missed Horry?"

The thin, anxious-looking, bespectacled young man, whom they had seen in conversation with the watchman that afternoon, came slowly forward.

"I went to the library at three to tell him it was time for his Latin lesson," he began, his voice dazed and shaken. "He wasn't there and I searched the house for him, surprised that he should have gone out without mentioning it. Then it occurred to me that he might have slipped over to Mr. Orbit's house next door, where there is an exceptionally fine collection of paintings which fascinate him. His ruling ambition is to become an artist and Mr. Orbit has encouraged him—but I digress. I went there to inquire for him but no one had seen him, and then, really anxious, I questioned the watchman who assured me that he had not gone out either gate."

"H'm!" remarked McCarty as Dennis shuffled his feet uneasily. "And what did you do after, Mr. Trafford?"

"I concluded that Horace had gone to see the artist who has been instructing him in drawing and of whom he is very fond; I could think of nothing else that would account for his disappearance, but it seemed probable some neighbor with a key to the Mall had entered just as he left so that the watchman need not have been called upon to open the gate for him." The young man's hands were clenching and unclenching nervously and beads of moisture stood out upon his forehead. "I therefore didn't mention it to Mrs. Goddard before she went to the musicale but waited, believing Horace would return at any moment. When the afternoon grew late I searched the house again, questioned the servants, even went across the street to inquire at the Sloane house for him; young

Mr. Sloane has taken an interest also in his artistic efforts and it is the only other house on the block he is privileged to visit by himself, since the Burminsters are still away. I—I met with no success!—If I had only given the alarm earlier!"

He was turning away with a groan when McCarty asked:

"Why didn't you think to 'phone Blaisdell and ask if the lad had been there, Trafford?"

The wretched tutor stared and Goddard, who had been standing with his elbows on the mantel and his head in his hands, suddenly wheeled.

"How did you know Blaisdell is the artist who has been giving him lessons?" he demanded.

McCarty smiled.

"I heard him say himself that Blaisdell was going on a sketching tour next month and would take him, only you wouldn't hear of it," he explained. "The boy was wild to go along——"

"Mr. Blaisdell started yesterday," the tutor interrupted. "I learned this when I telephoned to his studio this afternoon, as I did as soon as the idea occurred to me that Horace might have gone there. I forgot to mention it but my anxiety—! I feel criminally negligent in having taken the situation so easily!"

"Don't the boy ever get a chance to play with other lads?" Dennis spoke for the first time, his tone filled with pitying contempt. "Couldn't he have gone to the Park and then home to supper with one or another of them?"

"My son does not play in the Park," Goddard responded with dignity. "He rides there with a class from the Academy on two mornings of the week but the season

does not reopen until next month. Horace is delicate as I told you and has never cared for rough, physical exercise, although he is far from being a mollycoddle. He has a few friends of his own age but they are all still at their country homes; Mr. Trafford and I have telephoned to every one we can think of! Mrs. Goddard is prostrated and under the care of her physician; when she returned from Orbit's musicale and learned of Horace's disappearance she was almost beside herself. He is our only child, you know. If anything has happened to him—!"

He ran his hand violently through his scanty fringe of hair and McCarty observed:

" 'Tis queer the lad didn't tell you himself that Blaisdell was going away yesterday."

"He hasn't talked of him very much lately." Goddard hesitated and then went on: "Horace is an unusual boy, very sensitive and reserved. I don't pretend to understand him. He took it very much to heart when we declined to allow him to go on this sketching tour but, of course, it was out of the question; no one but an artist would have suggested such an impractical thing for a boy of his age, and with his frail constitution!—Damn that dog! He'll drive me out of my mind!"

A doleful, long-drawn howl, subdued but eloquent, reached their ears from below-stairs and McCarty remembered his brief talk with the boy in that very room three days before.

"Is that Max, the police dog your son was telling me about when I called here?"

"Yes. He wandered around whining until I couldn't stand it any longer and had him shut up. Devilish clever animal and devoted to Horry—knows there's

something wrong! By God, hear that! Midnight! What can have happened to my boy?"

He dropped into a chair burying his face in his hands as the clock struck and once more Dennis spoke.

"Have you any notion how much pocket money the lad had this day?"

It was Trafford who replied to him.

"Six dollars and seventy-five cents. I am teaching him to keep a budget and he carefully puts down whatever he spends each day."

"Little and red-headed, wasn't he, with a narrow chest and spindling legs—"

"Riordan means is he small for his age and kind of delicate looking?" McCarty amended hastily, glaring at the tactless interrogator. "How was he dressed when you last saw him and what's missing from his things?"

"He wore a brown pedestrian suit and brown shoes and golf stockings," the tutor answered. "He had a plain platinum wrist watch on a leather strap and a gold seal ring with the family coat of arms. Nothing else is missing except a brown cloth cap with the manufacturer's name, 'Knowles,' inside. Before communicating with you, Mr. Goddard and I telephoned to every hospital in the city, fearing that some street accident might have occurred, but no child whose appearance tallied in the least degree with his had been brought in. The only remaining possibility is that he is being detained somewhere for a ransom."

"Have you any other reason for thinking the lad may have been kidnapped?" McCarty turned to Goddard. "Know of anybody with a grudge against you or your family? Had any threatening letters?"

"Great heavens, no!" The bereaved father raised his

head. "Horry is a little chap for fourteen, looks nearer twelve in fact, and Mr. Trafford usually accompanies him when he leaves the Mall, but he begged so hard to go to Blaisdell's studio by himself that I allowed it, though it was against his mother's wishes; I wanted him to be manly and self-reliant, and the Madison Avenue cars pass Blaisdell's door near Fiftieth. I thought it was perfectly safe, but he may have been watched and marked by some criminal as a victim for kidnapping."

"That don't explain how or why he passed out of one gate or the other with not one on the whole block seeing him." McCarty shook his head. "You say you're wishful to avoid notoriety, or I'd advise you to report the lad's disappearance to the Bureau of Missing Persons and let the investigation take its regular course, but there's a chance still that he's not been kidnapped nor yet met with an accident. 'Twas for Riordan and me to try to locate him and get him back without having the newspapers getting out extras that you sent for me tonight?"

Dennis caught his breath audibly at this highly irregular supposition, but Goddard nodded eagerly.

"That's it, exactly! It would kill Mrs. Goddard to have the press make a sensational case of this while there is the slightest hope that Horace may be restored to us without publicity. You'll do what you can? I'll pay anything, a fortune, to have my son again, safe!"

"We'll do our best, Mr. Goddard," McCarty rose. "If we've no news for you by morning can we have a word with Mrs. Goddard then?"

"Of course. I'd take you to her now, but the doctor has given her something to quiet her. The servants don't know anything; I've questioned them till I'm hoarse

and been in touch with every one to whom Horry might have gone. For God's sake, find my boy!"

Young Trafford showed them out and McCarty glanced keenly into his pale, troubled face as he held the door open. He seemed on the point of speech but glanced back over his shoulder and then resolutely closed his lips. McCarty paused.

"Before we come in the morning you'd do well to tell the lad's father to come clean with us," he admonished in a lowered tone. "'Tis not by keeping anything back that he'll help!"

Trafford started.

"Do you think he is?" he countered quickly. "I've told you all I know, at any rate, but let me hear if there's anything more I can do. I'll sit up all night by the telephone."

"Where are we going now?" Dennis asked as his companion turned toward the east gate. "'Twas to find who killed Hughes that the inspector made deputies of us, not to be chasing runaway kids, but I'm trailing right with you."

"'Runaway,' is it? I thought that was your hunch when you asked what pocket money the lad had and then described him with more truth than politeness!" McCarty chuckled. "You think he's gone to join this artist fellow Blaisdell? 'Twill be easy to settle that when we find out where that tour was to commence, for Horace could not have gone far on six seventy-five."

"And we know how he got out all right," Dennis supplemented. "'Twas by that east gate ahead when Bill left it open so convenient!—Look at Orbit's house! Do you suppose his afternoon party is lasting on through the night?"

The awning and carpet were still stretched from the entrance door to curb, and, seemingly borne upon the subdued radiance of the glow which filtered through the curtained windows of the conservatory, there came to them faintly the strains of the organ. It was no majestic harmony this time, however, but a simple, insistently repetitive measure. McCarty paused to listen, shaking his head.

"Orbit's by himself and just kind of thinking through the organ; can't you tell, the way he's just wandering along, amusing himself? That's an easy little tune, too, that would stick in your head.—Come on. I've a notion to see part of this Mall we've not thought to examine yet."

"If there's a foot of it we've not been over, barring the insides of the other houses—!" began Dennis in obvious disappointment. "I thought we'd be getting after whoever takes care of Blaisdell's place to find where he's gone—"

"At this time of night?" snorted McCarty. "Has it come to you that Goddard may not be so far wrong at that, especially if he's got some reason he hasn't told for thinking the lad was stolen? I'm beginning to see the practical workings of those books of mine you turn your nose up at and I ask you, did Horace look to have nerve enought to run away? If he went outside these gates it was of his own free will, of course, and during the time Bill left the one of them open, but what if he'd been paid to do it? What if the lad had been decoyed outside? How do we know there's not others on the block concerned in it?"

"'Others on the block!'" repeated Dennis, stopping short as they passed the dark Bellamy house. "Mac! You're not thinking there could be any connection be-

tween what happened to Hughes four days ago and the Goddard kid's disappearance! You're not looking to have him found dead somewhere, poisoned! Glory be! What's come to this street all of a sudden?"

"I'm asking myself that," returned the other grimly. "I'm going no further in my mind, though, just saying it looks funny, that's all. Here's a handful of rich families living behind their gates in peace and seclusion for generations, with nothing ever happening except maybe a funeral now and then, for they could not shut out death. Then a murder takes place right in their midst, even if the victim did go far before he dropped in his tracks, and while there's still no answer to it somebody in the next house disappears."

"So that's why you hinted at notoriety, if Goddard took the case to headquarters instead of leaving it to us! We're still on the Hughes affair after all!" exclaimed Dennis, adding: "What's down here?"

McCarty had turned down the black passage or court between Mrs. Bellamy's and the closed Falkingham house next door on the east, and he vouchsafed no response to the companion who followed curiously at his heels until they had reached the rear of the boarded-up residence. Then he whispered cautiously:

"Got your flashlight?"

For answer Dennis produced the pocket electric torch without which he seldom went on a nocturnal adventure with McCarty. The latter took it from him, and, pressing the button, darted a minute but piercing ray of light along the rear of the houses whose front sidewalks they had just traversed.

"See that, Denny?" he whispered. "An open court as clear as the palm of your hand straight past the Bel-

lamys' and Orbit's to Goddard's on the corner. If the kid had wanted to get out without being seen he might have left the back of his house and come along this court to any of the passage-ways that lead out to the sidewalk nearer the gate."

"True for you," Dennis assented. "Turn the light along the back wall till we see how high it is, and whether there are any little doors in it or not."

But the wall, not of brick but of ancient brownstone, was as high as the city's regulations permitted, bare save in the rear of Orbit's miniature palace, where it was covered by a thick, impenetrable curtain of ivy, sable and glossy like black satin in the moving finger of light.

All at once heavy footsteps pounded along the sidewalk to the mouth of the passage-way they had just left and a brighter beam was trained suddenly upon them. Dennis dodged instinctively but McCarty turned and faced it, calling cautiously:

"Is it you, Dave Hollis? We've not gone yet, just taking a look around."

They had encountered the night watchman when they let themselves in at the west gate earlier in response to Eustace Goddard's summons, and now he merely grunted in acknowledgment and passed on.

"There's nothing more to be seen here," Dennis remarked. "No one could cross that wall without a ladder and though they might climb that ivy it could not be done carrying a boy the size of Horace."

"To say nothing of it being broad day and the back windows of all the houses in this row looking out at the performance," McCarty interjected. "All the same we'll stroll along to the Goddards' kitchen door and back, Denny."

The rear of Mrs. Bellamy's mansion was as dark as the front and in Orbit's also the lights had by now been extinguished. In the dead stillness their stealthy footsteps seemed to ring unnaturally loudly to their own ears. Only in the Goddard house did the dull glow from roof to cellar gleam forth through shrouded windows like sleepless, anxious eyes.

"'Tis almost unhealthy, the cleanness of everything!" Dennis looked about him as the flashlight circled over the spacious, immaculate court. "Not an ashcan nor so much as a garbage pail that a cat could hide behind! We're wasting our time here, Mac!"

But McCarty did not answer. He had gone halfway down the tradesmen's passage leading to the sidewalk and paused before a door in the side wall of the Goddard house. Dennis saw the light play in narrowing arcs over the paved ground before it and then settle to a mere pinpoint as McCarty stooped. After a moment he straightened and came swiftly back, cat-footed despite his bulk. He was holding out some small object in his extended hand and as he reached his companion's side he played the light upon it—a small, plain platinum watch, crushed beyond repair, on a pathetically short leather wristband.

CHAPTER X

THE MAN IN THE SHADOWS

THE cold, early light of a clouded morning found McCarty and Dennis seated over pancakes and coffee in an all-night restaurant on Sixth Avenue not far from Fiftieth Street. The intervening hours since they left the New Queen's Mall had been fruitlessly spent in a weary round of the ferries and railroad terminals in search of news of a small, solitary traveler and now they had just come from an interview with the superintendent of the palatial studio apartment building in which the artist Blaisdell resided, whose exact address a nearby druggist had been fortuitously able to supply.

"I always thought those painter guys lived in garrets with never a square meal nor a second shirt," Dennis spoke in a slightly dazed tone. "I mind that day watchman Bill said young Horace told him Blaisdell was one of the greatest in the country, but he must have some regular business to be able to live in a place like that! There's one thing sure; no matter how much of a fancy he'd took to the kid he could afford to get into no trouble by taking him on a tour without his father and mother being willing, and if the boy showed up he'd bring him back. Where is it again that he's gone sketching?"

"Up in the She-wan-gunk Mountains," McCarty pronounced the name with painstaking care. "Ellenville is his headquarters, the superintendent said, if you re-

member; the Detweiler House. Granting there was a train, and the lad had more money with him than that four-eyed tutor suspected, he could have got there by early evening, but no word of any kind had come when I 'phoned the Goddard house an hour ago."

"I know," Dennis drained his cup and held it out to the sleepy waiter to be refilled. "'Tis too bad you did not tell Trafford about finding the watch."

"And send him into hysterics? He's as bad as a woman now!" McCarty shrugged. "The doctor give orders Mrs. Goddard wasn't to be woke up till eight but we'll chance it by seven. How do you feel, Denny?"

Dennis eyed the questioner with swift suspicion.

"There's nothing the matter with me that I know of!"

"'Tis a pity!" McCarty commented callously. "I was thinking if you called up the lieutenant at the engine house and told him how sick you were he'd maybe let you off duty the day. There's a 'phone over on the cigar counter."

"And what's ailing me?" Dennis' eyes sparkled but his tone was flat for his inventive faculties were at low ebb in the early morning.

"From what I've learned lately, Denny, about mental defectives—!"

But Dennis had risen and stalking to the counter he took up the 'phone. Presently McCarty heard his voice raised in a harrowing description of pain but it was abruptly cut short, and, after listening for a moment with a dazed look on his face, he silently replaced the receiver and returned to his chair.

"Well?" demanded McCarty expectantly.

"Mike's out of the hospital and he'll take my nine-to-six shift."

"But just what did the lieutenant say to you?"

"He told me," Dennis replied very slowly and distinctly, "to get the hell off the 'phone, for I'd be no good at a false alarm while my crook-chasing side-kick McCarty was on the job again. I gathered from a few more remarks before he hung up on me that your friend Jimmie Ballard of the 'Bulletin' has been nosing around the engine house, to get dope from me about what you're pulling off, and by that same token running the lieutenant ragged; 'tis what I get for associating with you."

It was McCarty's turn to eye his companion suspiciously but Dennis' stolid countenance was quite devoid of humor and he retorted:

"Is that so? Well, we'd better be associating ourselves with the Goddards again now or there'll be no news for Jimmie or the inspector either, which is worse. Come on."

"Unless the boy is found as Hughes was," Dennis suggested optimistically. "It would let the Lindholms out, but who except a lunatic would be poisoning children and servants, premiscuous-like?"

McCarty's reply was a stare and a grunt which the other construed as derisive and he lapsed into aggrieved silence as they made their way once more to the gates, behind which so much mystery and menace brooded.

Trafford opened the door almost before the bell had ceased to echo through the house and his haggard face was mute evidence that the suspense had not been lifted.

"Have you—?" He could not voice the rest of the question but McCarty replied briskly:

"We've several possibilities, Trafford, and we're following every last one of 'em up. No news is good news just now. Is Mrs. Goddard awake yet, do you know?"

"Her maid told me when I inquired a few minutes ago that she was stirring. I'll go and see." The young tutor turned dispiritedly away. "You'll find Mr. Goddard in the smoking-room at the rear on the Avenue side."

In dimensions and ponderous style of furnishing the smoking-room resembled a club lounge rather than a private apartment and it was a full minute before they descried Eustace Goddard's rotund figure relaxed in the depths of a huge leather armchair. He was apparently asleep but on their approach he opened widely staring eyes upon them and sprang up with an inarticulate cry.

"We've not located your son yet, Mr. Goddard," McCarty spoke quickly before the father could frame words. "We know what every minute means to you and 'tis for that we're going to bring the inspector and some of his other men into it. I can promise you there'll be no publicity through us."

"By God, McCarty, they can blazon it in every paper in the land if it will bring our boy back to us!" Goddard cried brokenly. "The horror of this night has made everything else unimportant! You mean you—you've failed?"

"Not exactly, sir, but there are only the two of us now and 'twill save time if others take up some of the clues we've got," McCarty explained.

"There's the telephone," Goddard waved a shaking hand toward a stand half concealed behind a lacquered screen. "Get the whole department if you need it. I'll offer any reward you suggest—fifty thousand? A hundred?"

"We'll settle that when the inspector comes." McCarty moved to the screen and took up the receiver, and Dennis cleared his throat.

"How many doors are there to this house?"

"Four!" Goddard replied in a surprised tone. "The one at the front, two at the rear—kitchen and tradesmen's entrances—and a smaller door at the side opening on the court that runs between this house and Orbit's. But why do you ask? What are the clues you've found?"

Dennis coughed discreetly, and from behind the screen came McCarty's voice.

"Is it yourself, Inspector? . . . Yes, me, McCarty. . . . No, at Goddard's and you're needed. . . . Wait a bit! Can you lay hands on both Martin and Yost? . . . Can't talk now, sir. Get me? . . . All right, bring Martin along but send Yost over to—to Bill, 0565. . . . That's it . . . Maybe and maybe not . . . Sure, I've been in touch with Bill and he knows the party I'm looking for. Tell Yost to wait and 'phone here if anything turns up . . . Of course not, Inspector, till you take it in hand! 'By."

The last had been straight blarney, but Dennis shivered as the receiver clicked on its hook. Well he knew that telephone number and the grim little house far over toward the river where, for a brief interval, the bluff, kindly Bill harbored the city's unknown dead! Had the sickly little Goddard heir gone the way of Hughes after all?

"Why did you ask about the doors?" The conversation had evidently held only its obvious meaning for the man before them. "Horace must have been induced in some way to leave the house, for no one could have entered with Trafford and all the servants about!"

"He did leave, and by the side door," McCarty held out the shattered little wristwatch. "Does this belong to the lad?"

"Good God, yes! He wore it yesterday!" Goddard

seized it and then sank into his chair. "It's—smashed! He must have been handled brutally perhaps even—!"

"That don't follow, sir!" McCarty interrupted. "The strap slips out of the buckle easy, for I tried it, and the lad might have dropped it without noticing. Anybody going to one of the back doors could have come along and trod on it after, for 'twas in the alley right in front of the door that I found it. And now—"

"Mrs. Goddard is awake and ready to see you now," Trafford's voice sounded from the threshold and Goddard started up once more.

"She knows there is no news?" he asked, and at the tutor's nod added: "Come then, but don't tax her beyond her strength and don't mind any—any wild statements which she may make. My poor wife is almost out of her mind!"

"Of course; we understand," McCarty darted a quick glance at Dennis and then turned to the tutor. "Trafford, Inspector Druet and another man are on their way up from headquarters and you'll be helping matters if you tell the both of them what's happened and all about them you 'phoned to for trace of the lad."

In silence they followed Goddard to the tiny jewel-box of an elevator, whose velvet and gold and glittering crystal mirrors made Dennis gasp. He gasped again when their guide pressed a button and they shot abruptly upward and his weatherbeaten face turned a delicate green as they stopped with a smooth but sickening swoop at the second floor. He was the first out with the opening of the door, but there was no time for the aside which trembled on his lips, for Goddard led the way down the wide hall to the doorway in which the figure of an elderly maid was silhouetted against the dim light of the room within.

"Eustace!" A woman's trembling voice sounded from behind her. "It can't be that nothing is known, nothing! Did you tell them about that—"

"Everything is being done, Clara." Goddard motioned the maid aside and McCarty and Dennis followed him into the dressing-room. They received only a confused impression of mahogany and old-rose and tall mirrors, of a faint, aromatic perfume and the sound of deep-drawn, convulsive breathing. The next moment their eyes were caught and held by the long figure outstretched upon a chaise-longue, imposing even in the dishevelled abandonment of grief. Mrs. Goddard was a woman well over forty, but her distraught face still bore traces of the beauty which must normally have been hers. There was no touch of gray in the masses of luxuriant dark hair which the maid had arranged with evident haste, but that night had etched lines about the fine eyes and the firm though sensitive mouth that would never be erased.

As her husband went on speaking, her glance swept past him to the two who waited at his elbow.

"Everything that is humanly possible is being done, my dear!" Goddard repeated more emphatically. "These are the police officers I called in, and they want to ask you a few questions. Do you think you can collect yourself enough to stick to facts and not foolish, morbid fancies?"

"I am quite collected, Eustace!" There was a note almost of defiance in Mrs. Goddard's tones and she sat up among her pillows with an unconscious dignity, in spite of the emotion which she held in check with such obvious effort. "Ask me anything you please! I—I only want my baby safe once more!"

"Of course, ma'am," McCarty responded soothingly. "You went out and left the lad on the couch in the library

and when you came back to get ready for the musicale next door you thought he was with his teacher. Now, what was the first you knew of his disappearance?"

"When I returned from the musicale. It was late, after six, and my husband met me in the hall with the news. He and Mr. Trafford had been telephoning everywhere! They thought Horace might have gone to some of our friends, but he had never done such a thing as to leave the Mall without our knowledge and I knew that something terrible had happened. I could feel it—here!" Her slender, very white hands flew to her breast. "I cannot blame Mr. Trafford for not starting the search for Horace in the early afternoon; he supposed he had slipped away to the studio of an artist who has taken a great fancy to our little boy, but Mr. Blaisdell is not in town."

The forced composure still held her and only her fluttering hands and quick-drawn breath gave evidence of her supreme agitation.

"You don't think the lad has gone to join him, do you?" McCarty asked.

"Run away, you mean?" Mrs. Goddard shook her head slowly. "Oh, no! Horace would never dream of such a thing! Mr. Blaisdell wanted to take him but we would not hear of it and Horace had no idea of disobeying our wishes. He has never been away from us before —before yesterday!"

"Then you think he has been kidnapped?"

At the question Goddard, who had moved around to the other side of the couch, took a step forward, the sagging muscles of his round face tightening as his jaw tensed but his wife did not take her eyes from those of McCarty.

"He isn't here!" her trembling voice broke. "He wouldn't run away! The earth didn't open and—and an avalanche descend upon him! It must have been that man!"

"What man!" McCarty and Dennis spoke in chorus, and then Goddard placed his hand on his wife's shoulder.

"Now, Clara!" he admonished. "You promised—!"

"To give us facts, Mr. Goddard!" interrupted McCarty sternly. "If Mrs. Goddard can tell us whatever it was you were holding back last night so much the better! You 'phoned to me that the lad had been kidnapped but you couldn't give me any reason for thinking so except that he was gone, and you didn't breathe a word about any 'man'!—Will you tell us, ma'am?"

"There's nothing to tell!" Goddard insisted obstinately. "My wife is nervous, imaginative, and so is Horace. He was badly frightened by a strange man here in the Mall a short time ago and his mother was quite frantic about it. It was some days before she would allow him to go out alone again, but personally I think he exaggerated—"

"Our boy would not tell a falsehood!" Mrs. Goddard interrupted. "It was just at dusk one afternoon about a fortnight ago, or perhaps less, when Horace had returned alone from Mr. Blaisdell's studio. He entered the Mall by the east gate as usual, but stopped to play with a little white Persian kitten, the pet of Mrs. Bellamy's baby. Mrs. Bellamy lives just two doors away, next to Mr. Orbit's. The watchman had passed him and gone on toward the west gate when all at once the kitten darted across the street and Horace followed, afraid that it might become lost. It ran into the open court between the Parsons house and the closed one next door belonging to the Quentin estate and Horace was stooping to coax it to

him when he was seized from behind by a strange man and searched!"

"Searched?" echoed McCarty.

"Yes. The man pressed Horace back against him with one hand over his mouth and felt in all his pockets with the other, but he took nothing and never uttered a word! My little son was too startled to struggle at first, and all at once the man released him—and disappeared!"

"Did the boy have any money with him?" Dennis could contain himself no longer.

"Three or four dollars, I believe, but the man left it untouched." Mrs. Goddard's eyes shifted to those of the questioner. "It was quite dark there in that narrow space between the two houses, but Horace saw the face which bent down over his distinctly and he said the man was an utter stranger whom he had never seen in the Mall before; rough, unshaven and desperate looking!"

"Which way did he go?" McCarty took up the interrogation once more. "Was it down the alley to the street or up in the open court behind the houses?"

"How could the child tell?" Goddard interjected before his wife could speak. "It was almost dark and he was terror-stricken!"

"Horace told us that the man ran toward the rear and disappeared in the shadows of a doorway at—at the left," Mrs. Goddard replied, as though her husband had not spoken.

"At the left, facing the rear of the houses on the north side of the way?" McCarty was thinking rapidly aloud. "That'll be Parsons' house then!—Why didn't you want us to know this, Mr. Goddard?"

"Because it can have no possible bearing on the disappearance of our son yesterday!" Goddard retorted hotly.

"He ran home immediately and told us, and I instituted a thorough search without delay, but the watchman could find no trace of the fellow and insisted he had admitted no one that day through either gate who resembled Horace's description. The Parsons' servants had seen nothing of him and he has not reappeared since, although a strict watch was kept. It is madness to suppose that Horace left this house of his own accord to meet the fellow, when he stood in mortal terror of him—!"

"Not unless he met him accidental-like and got waylaid a second time!" Dennis broke in irrepressibly. "There's no telling what he was after if 'twas not money, but if he was crazy and the boy put up a bit of a struggle—!"

"A-a-ah!" Mrs. Goddard's taut nerves gave way and she broke into a low, wailing cry. "That is my fear! No sane person would harm him; but all night long in horrible dreams I have seen him—! My baby! He is hidden somewhere, helpless, suffering, and I cannot reach him! I shall go mad!"

CHAPTER XI

THE CLOSED HOUSE

"A FINE mess you made of that!" McCarty remarked disgustedly when the door of Mrs. Goddard's dressing-room had closed behind them, shutting in her husband and the maid. "Just when we were on the point of getting at the truth, too!"

"Truth, is it?" Dennis retorted. "I suppose you mean you'd have been finding out what the crazy guy expected to find in the boy's pockets!"

"No, I know that already!" McCarty emitted a grim chuckle. "'Twill keep, though, for we've got quick work ahead of us now and the inspector must have been waiting this long while."

"You can shoot yourself down in that birdcage if you've a mind to, but my own legs will carry me!" Dennis eyed the elevator door, cunningly concealed in the high oak paneling of the hall, with a hostile glare. Then he added sarcastically: "I've no doubt but that, by the new book learning you've got lately, you know who the guy was, too, and where he came from and how he got out, through solid walls and barred gates! Education is a grand thing, but where is Horace? Answer me that!"

"If we're not able to answer that soon, Denny, I'm thinking it would be best left unanswered forever, for the sake of that woman back there." McCarty spoke with deep earnestness. "There's a feeling in me that we've

something working against us more than human, something worse than lightning or the plague, even! If we could only see our way clear to the black heart of it!"

They went down the stairs together, to find the inspector and Martin awaiting them with Trafford, who appeared crushed from the gruelling half hour through which he had passed.

McCarty addressed him first, with a mere nod to his superior.

"Trafford, why didn't you tell me about the man who grabbed the lad in the alley not two weeks ago?"

"Mr. Goddard forbade me," the wretched young man stammered, then drew himself up with a vain assumption of dignity. "Since it has nothing to do with the case—"

"We're the best judges of that!" McCarty waved him away peremptorily. "Tell Mr. Goddard we'll see him later. . . . Now, inspector, before we talk, if you'll follow a suggestion of mine just once more, there's a train Martin will be after catching and he'll have to hustle to do it."

The inspector eyed him keenly for a moment and then nodded.

"Go to it," he said briefly. "Get the instructions, Martin."

McCarty drew the young operative aside and after a brief interchange of words the latter took his departure. Then the inspector motioned the other two into the library and closed the door.

"Now I want an explanation of this!" he announced, in a tone which took McCarty swiftly back to the old days. "Why didn't you report to me at once when you learned what had happened? What have you two been

doing since? I made you deputies, but by the Lord I didn't appoint you chiefs!"

McCarty told him in detail of their activities during the night and added frankly:

"I didn't report, inspector, because I wanted a few hours' the start of you, and that's the truth. So far, I've only done what I think you would have, yourself, but I'm working from an angle of my own that you'd not have taken. I've sent Martin just now to Ellenville, to find out if this Blaisdell has heard anything of the lad, but that's only routine; the real job is here in the Mall, even if Horace turns up dead or alive somewhere else."

"What's this angle of yours on the case?" the inspector demanded curtly. "What did Goddard forbid that tutor mentioning and why?"

McCarty described the interview with Mrs. Goddard and the inspector listened attentively, asking when he had finished:

"What do you propose to do? Put the screws on Goddard to find out why he kept that back? He can't be a party to the kidnapping of his own son!"

"No, but he thinks he knows who the fellow was, and that he'll hear from him or them back of him soon with a view to ransom; he's ready to offer fifty or a hundred thousand reward, whenever you give the word. Until he does hear from him, though, he can't be sure what happened to the lad and that's why he's anxious. His wife don't know anything about this private opinion of his, of course, and naturally she's half-crazed," McCarty summed up as though his process of deduction was equally clear to his two companions. "We'll leave him worry awhile, for 'tis my opinion he's mistaken entirely. I want a look now inside that empty house next to the Parsons'

across the street and there's no time to wait for red tape to get permission."

"The Quentin house, that's been closed all these years?" The inspector looked fixedly at him and Dennis gaped. "You think the fellow might have hidden there after letting the little boy go? Come on, we'll take a chance."

A huge dark blue limousine of impressive aspect was just drawing up before Number Seven as they emerged from the Goddard house and crossed the street. At sight of the distinguished, gray-bearded man who alighted and went up the steps the inspector halted with an exclamation.

"Do you know who that is, Mac? The ambassador to whom the mayor gave the keys of the city only yesterday down at City Hall! If he comes himself to call on the Parsons family they're of more importance even than I thought!"

"And 'tis small wonder they don't bother to associate with the rest on the block, millionaires or no," McCarty commented, eyeing the equipage with vast respect as they passed. "You said the old gentleman was—?"

He paused suddenly and Dennis' eyes followed his to the great entrance doors which were closing slowly behind the aristocratic back of the ambassador. There was just a glimpse of a thin, sallow-faced man-servant in black, who appeared to sweep the trio with a curiously penetrating gaze and then the scene was shut out.

McCarty seemed to have lost interest in the question he was about to ask and they went on in silence to the narrow, paved court between the Parsons residence and the vast, rambling pile of brownstone next door.

"Let's go up here and see if the rear is open for the length of the block, the way it is on the other side of the

street," McCarty suggested. "There's Parsons' side door, the one Horace said the man disappeared into; it's pretty deep, you see, deep enough for him to have just stepped into the embrasure and been hid in the shadows of late afternoon without actually going through the door itself, though I don't say he didn't, at that!"

" 'Tis likely a nut that'd go around grabbing children and searching their pockets would be let into the Parsons'!" Dennis exclaimed in fine scorn. "Unless the boy made the whole thing up for a sensation, the way some kids do, how'd the man get in and out of the block? The house on this side looks to be boarded up, as tight as a drum."

They reached the rear and found the open court which extended along behind the houses, to be even wider than that on the south side of the street, the back wall higher and devoid of a single vine. The silent Quentin house presented as blank an aspect as from the front, its sealed windows and barred doors staring like blind eyes in the sunlight. The inspector shook his head.

"No one has entered here in months; years maybe," he remarked. "The padlocks are so rusted on those board doors that they would have to be broken and the boards themselves are weatherbeaten and rotting. I'm surprised they'd let the place get into such a condition, even though it is in litigation. . . . What are you doing, Riordan?"

The house, being the corner one, was built around in an ell on the Madison Avenue side and in the right angle formed by its two walls a leader descended from the roof. Dennis was examining and testing it speculatively. At the inspector's question he turned.

"Do you mind, sir, 'twas a wide shiny mark burnished on a pipe running across the top of an air-shaft that

showed Mac and me how a murderer had swung himself down on a rope and in at a window, in the first case ever he butted in on after he left the Force?" he asked. "This rain-pipe looks to be too frail to bear the weight of a cat, but 'tis not a cat rubbed the rust off here, and here, so it shines like new tin! I put on a clean shirt yesterday, more's the pity, but hold my coat and hat, Mac."

"Mind or you'll break your neck!" McCarty warned, forgetful of his friend's calling, as he complied. Dennis scorned to reply but swarmed up the straining, creaking leader to the second floor, swinging out to land lightly and sure-footedly on the broad sill of a window two feet away. The leader, released suddenly from his weight, tore loose from its fastening and canted crazily against the angle of the wall, shaking and clattering, and McCarty exclaimed:

"You'll not be coming down the way you went up!"

"True for you!" Dennis sang out with a note of rising excitement. "I'll be coming down the way the last guy did who lit here, and that's by the inside! Wait you there for me."

He had been examining the sill upon which he stood and the boards which covered the window, pressing experimentally upon the latter. Suddenly one of them gave way, forced inward with an accompanying crash of glass.

"Now you've done it!" McCarty observed superfluously. "Look out there is not more than us waiting for you inside!"

"I've my flashlight, thanks be, and my two fists," Dennis responded. "That board wasn't tight; the nails had just been stuck back in the holes. Here goes another!"

With the rending of wood the second followed the first

and with a third which he wrenched loose Dennis smashed in the fragments of glass which still clung to the sash, then wriggled lithely through the aperture and disappeared. McCarty drew a long breath and turned to his former superior.

"I'd like to be following him," he said wistfully. "If so be some guy is hiding in there—the same one that grabbed the lad—he'll be desperate enough to kill, and Denny's too slow-thinking and slow-moving to take care of himself! I'm heftier than him and 'tis long since I did any shinnying, but maybe that pipe would hold me after all!"

"A man with four medals from the fire department for meritorious conduct and conspicuous bravery doesn't need a nursemaid, Mac!" the inspector responded with a laugh. "Personally, I don't believe any one's been in there for months before him but—what's that?"

"That" was a sudden subdued commotion within, a long-sustained clatter followed by a reverberating thud and then a silence ominous in its intensity.

"I knew it!" McCarty dropped the hat and coat and made for the wooden barrier that sealed the main back door. "I'm going in if I break the whole damn' place down! Denny! Denny! I'm coming!"

His reassuring roar was lost in the mighty smash of his fist on the rotting boards but after the first blow the inspector reached him and dragged him back.

"Have you taken leave of your senses?" the latter demanded. "You'll have the whole block aroused to find us breaking and entering! Riordan's all right!—There, I hear somebody moving about inside. Listen!"

McCarty waited, panting and tense, and faintly there came to his ears the sound as of stumbling footsteps

within and a scratching noise from a window at the left of the door which, being protected by an iron grill-work, had been left unboarded. A heavy green shade hung close against the inner side of the dirty windowpane, furrowed by many past rainstorms, and the stout bars seemed at a glance to be firmly imbedded in the broad stone sill but McCarty strode to them and began trying them one by one, while behind him the inspector drew his revolver and stood expectant.

"Look here, sir!" McCarty whispered. "'Tis fine burglar protection they've got in these houses! See how this bar slides up into its groove in the top of the casement, till you can pull it out below and down over the sill entirely? I'll bet the next will work the same.—It does! If we'd taken the trouble to find this out at first—! Glory be, here's Denny himself!"

The green shade had flown up and the face of Dennis appeared in a sickly yellow aura cast by his flashlight, but he promptly extinguished it and set to work on the catch of the window. As McCarty removed the fourth bar the sash opened upward and the two, who had meanwhile been exchanging grimaces pregnant with meaning gazed silently at each other for a full minute. Then McCarty found his voice.

"Where is he!" he demanded. "What did you do with him? We heard the row out here—!"

"There wasn't any 'him,'" Dennis interrupted sheepishly. "It was me, by myself. I came on the stairs unexpected-like and took the whole flight of them without even breaking my flashlight!—But come in, the both of you, and see what I found!"

McCarty scrambled over the sill and Inspector Druet, despite his added years, followed with the effortless ease

of a boy. They found themselves in a large room bare of furniture but in the dust which lay like a heavy carpet upon the floor a meandering trail of footsteps, many times traversed, ran from the window by which they had entered to a connecting door opening into a laundry. Dusty finger-marks, with here and there the imprint of a whole hand, were plainly outlined on the white woodwork of the inner sill and below it greasy pieces of wrapping paper were scattered. In a corner two pitchers and several small tin cans were heaped.

"Some one has been camping out here, that's evident," the inspector remarked. "Getting his food handed in to him through that window, too!"

"And it wasn't any ordinary bought stuff, the kind that comes ready fixed in stores." McCarty was poking about in the papers. "Here's the carcass of a whole chicken, pieces of fancy rolls and pastry and other stuff, but it's all stale; it's been here for four or five days, at least."

"And there's traces of coffee in those pitchers and cans, to say nothing of the wine bottles on that shelf!" Dennis pointed impatiently. "He's been living on the fat of the land from one of the houses in this row and the nearer the likelier, even if it does happen to be occupied by the Parsons! Come upstairs till I show you more."

The larger adjoining room had evidently been the laundry, for rows of enameled tubs and washing machines were ranged against the wall and dryers stood about, but all were covered with a thick blanket of dust. Dennis led the way through a series of kitchens and pantries, far more elaborate than those they had encountered in Orbit's house, to the back stairs and up to the second floor rear, into the room with the broken window. All the way they had followed that zigzag trail of overlapping footsteps

and here the floor was crossed and recrossed by a network of them. This apartment had evidently been one of the master bedrooms, for a well-appointed, marble-lined bath opened from it and heavy, old-fashioned furniture of richly carved mahogany was ranged with stiff precision about the room. A half-burned candle, shielded from the window by an old cardboard box-cover, stood on a side table together with a handful of matches and some cigarette stubs. McCarty pointed to it.

"He couldn't live without a light but he hid it from the window and he didn't dare carry it when he went down to get his food; that's why those footprints ramble so, he was feeling his way in the dark. That bed looks as if it had been slept in, with all those old draperies piled on it, and what's in that big pitcher on the bureau?"

"Water," Dennis replied. "There's still a little left, though you can see from the marks on the inside where it has dried down."

"Evaporated?" The inspector nodded. "That would show, too, that whoever the fellow was he hadn't used any of it for a few days at least.—Hello, what's this?"

He had turned to the bathroom and after a moment he emerged from it holding a bright, new razor, a piece of soap and a very dirty Turkish towel.

"The water has been turned off in the pipes of course, but there is an empty bucket in there in which some must have been brought to him, and he seems to have had some regard to his personal appearance, at least. The Goddard boy said the man who had tackled him was rough-looking and unshaved, didn't he?"

"When he tackled him, yes," McCarty replied. "He had chance enough to clean up after, as soon as whoever was helping him to hide here brought him the things."

"He did more than that!" Dennis declared. There was an unwonted flush on his leathery cheeks and his gray eyes were alight with excitement. "Why do you suppose he was hiding here, anyway? Why does anybody hide? If 'tis not to do something unlawful, couldn't he have broken the law already and be hiding from it?"

"Denny!" McCarty breathed. "What are you getting at? You've found out something! Who is the man?"

"Who's wanted now, Inspector?" Dennis asked. "Somebody that's gentleman enough to keep shaved and clean in spite of everything, who'd appreciate good food and wine and the best in life, and yet was a convicted criminal for all that!"

" 'Convicted—!' " McCarty started forward. "An ex-crook, do you mean? How did you guess—?"

" 'Ex-crook,' nothing!" retorted his confrère. "I'm not up in the latest of prison styles but if this ain't a penitentiary get-up I'm an Orangeman!"

He flung open a closet door behind him, dived in and dragged forth in triumph a tell-tale suit of stained and ragged gray.

"Sing Sing!" exclaimed Inspector Druet. "Good Lord, Riordan, you've made a find!—Do you remember, Mac, that three men escaped last month? One was killed making his getaway and another caught and transferred to Dannemora, but the third of those that crashed out then is still at large and there's a big reward out! Heaven knows how he managed to get into the Mall and why he should have come here, of all places, but I'll stake my life that the man who has been hiding in this house is George Radley!"

CHAPTER XII

THE BREATH OF DEATH

"WHO is he?" asked Dennis, wide-eyed. "Who is this George Radley?"

"You remember, don't you, Mac?" The inspector turned to the ex-roundsman. "Radley was a young chemist—"

"A chemist!" caroled McCarty and Dennis in unison. Then their mouths shut like traps and they stared at each other.

"What's got into you two?" Inspector Druet demanded. "This Radley was accused, together with an accomplice, of sending poison to a mutual enemy, concealed in candy. An innocent member of the man's household ate it and died, but the actual evidence against the accused was so weak that they could only be convicted of manslaughter after two disagreements and then the accomplice only got two or three years and Radley ten. He'll have several more to serve yet, however, even allowing for good behavior and then, too, a guard was seriously injured in trying to prevent that crush-out, so he's wanted bad. He could never have got as far as the city in those clothes!"

"He had others outside of 'em, either stole or slipped to him." Dennis returned to the closet and produced a pair of dilapidated shoes, gray trousers and a long mackinaw, together with a soft Panama hat. "Only the

shoes are ragged, you see; the rest is in pretty good condition and there's an umbrella in a corner of the closet. He could have got past the watchman easy on a rainy night, especially if he said he was coming to see a maid, maybe, in one of the houses.—Still, that don't account for his grabbing the Goddard kid, if 'twas him, and going through his pockets!"

"His clothes may be a find but we've not got himself yet. What if he's hid under this roof now?" McCarty exclaimed. "He'd have no call to harm the Goddard lad unless Horace found out he was here and was going to give him away, but harm or no, if so he's had no chance to escape—!"

"You're right, Mac!" The inspector dropped the clothes he had been examining and started for the door. "We'll smoke him out!"

But a painstaking search of the great house from attic to cellar failed to reveal any further trace of the refugee and they departed at last through the open window in the basement to round the corner into the court and come face to face with Bill Jennings.

"Mr. Parsons' butler next door sent me," the watchman explained. "He said somebody'd heard a noise in there and I'd better see about it. Nothing wrong I hope, inspector?"

Open curiosity rang in his tones but the official replied bruskly:

"Nothing. We'll go over the other empty houses on the block later. It's all right."

"What's this we've been hearing about a strange man who scared the Goddard lad in this very court not two weeks ago?" McCarty asked as they approached the sidewalk once more.

Bill Jennings looked uncomfortable.

"There was no strange man got between these gates while I was on!" he averred defensively. "It must have been some butler or houseman that works on the block, trying to play a joke on the little feller. It was a week ago Saturday that he raised the rumpus about it but there wasn't any sign of the rough-looking kind of guy he described when Mr. Trafford and I looked, and we went over every foot of the courts. . . . There's Mr. Orbit motioning."

It was to the inspector and his deputies, however, that Orbit beckoned and when they had crossed to him he asked with grave concern:

"Is it true that Horace Goddard cannot be found? One of the maids from next door told Jean, and said that you had been notified, but I couldn't believe it! Trafford came to my house yesterday afternoon, though, inquiring for him—but I forgot, McCarty and Riordan were present. Is it possible that the little boy hasn't been seen since?"

"Not so far as we've been able to discover," the inspector responded. "It's a pretty bad business. If he was a normal, healthy, mischievous kid we'd be apt to think he ran away, but from all accounts he was sickly and timid, not the kind to strike out for himself."

"Horace is very nervous and highly strung, with remarkable artistic possibilities," Orbit observed thoughtfully. "I'm immensely interested in him and my friend Blaisdell is of the opinion that he'll become a great painter some day if his people don't kill his aspirations by lack of sympathy; like a sensitive plant he needs encouragement, nurturing.—But what can have happened to him? If he isn't with friends or relatives the child

must have met with an accident! Has an alarm been sent out?"

"We're trying every way to locate him. He used to run in and out of your house a lot, didn't he? Did you ever hear him speak of any one he might have gone to now?" the inspector asked. "We know, of course, how disappointed he was when his father and mother wouldn't let him go on a sketching tour with this Mr. Blaisdell you mention, but he seems to have got over it. Do you know if he had any boy friends his own age?"

Orbit shook his head.

"None. He is a solitary little chap, self-contained and retiring, and I don't think he cares very much for the society of other boys. He would not have gone away and remained like this without a word if he was able to communicate with his family. It seems inexplicable! Goddard must be dreadfully cut up about it, to say nothing of the boy's mother, and I feel badly myself! I should hate to think of any accident happening to him! I'm going in to see Goddard and ask if there is anything I can do.—Meanwhile, you've no news for me about Hughes' strange death, have you? It is odd that two such mysterious, unrelated incidents should have occurred in less than a week, even though Hughes must have taken the poison either accidentally or through someone's murderous intent, after he left the Mall that night. Haven't you come upon the slightest indication?"

"We're working on several promising ones." The time-worn formula was repeated a trifle wearily. "Let you know when there's anything to give out, Mr. Orbit. . . . Come on, Mac; it's nearly noon."

Orbit turned toward the Goddard house but the others had scarcely gone a half dozen steps in the opposite direc-

tion when again they were halted. This time it was by the pretty little French nurse and she drew the Bellamy baby closer, gazing at McCarty with wide, affrighted eyes as she voiced her question.

"Pardon, monsieur, but is it of a truth, that which I have heard? Must it be that the little *garçon* of that house there is lost?"

"That's about the size of it, ma'am," McCarty removed his reblocked derby with a flourish. "I don't suppose you saw him playing around anywheres yesterday afternoon?"

"But no!" She caught her breath with a slight gasp. "All the night he has been depart, alors! It is terrible, that! He is so *gentil,* so good, the little Horace! He would not run away—is it that he have been stole'? Me, I have fear for the little Maude—"

She hugged her small charge tighter and the baby stared at them solemnly.

"There ain't much danger of that!" McCarty laughed reassuringly. "I guess the lad will turn up all right. When did you see him last?"

"Yesterday morning, when he have passed with M'sieu Trafford. Oh, if he has been keednap' we do not go beyond these gates!"

She nodded and led the child away slowly while Dennis remarked:

"Pretty and a lady, but did ever you hear the like of such lingo? No wonder them French have a fit when they talk; 'tis from trying to understand each other."

McCarty darted a quick glance at the harassed frown on the inspector's face, and then replied to his companion:

"She had it straight, though. Horace has 'been depart' all right, and if we don't get him back soon there'll

be a bigger howl than ever from the chief!—Isn't that what you're thinking, sir?"

The inspector nodded gloomily.

"I'm going to the agents in charge of these houses and get the keys." He indicated the two closed residences east of Mrs. Bellamy's. "Try to get a line meanwhile on who slipped food to the man hiding over there and what became of him and meet me here in an hour."

"It's not much he's wanting," Dennis remarked, as the inspector left them abruptly and strode toward the gate. "Still, if we could trace what cellar them wine bottles came from that was stacked up on the shelf in that empty house—look! The ambassador's limousine is going away."

The impressive dark blue car was indeed moving slowly away from the curb in front of the Parsons house and the great front door closing. They caught another fleeting glimpse of the sallow-faced manservant and then McCarty exclaimed:

"Come on! I want a few words with the butler over there anyway, and maybe the old gentleman himself, and don't be putting in your oar, Denny, and rocking the boat; I know what I'm after."

Dennis followed in injured silence and they mounted the steps of the stately house and rang the bell. A lengthy pause ensued. McCarty was about to ring again when the door opened suddenly and the manservant whom they had seen a moment before stood confronting them.

He paid no heed to Dennis but his dull, sunken eyes fastened themselves on McCarty and as he stared his sallow cheeks seemed to whiten.

"Hello, Porter. You remember me, I see," the latter

said briskly. "Me and my friend here want to have a little talk with you."

"My name is not Porter; it's Roberts," the man replied stiffly with an evident effort. "You've made a mistake."

"Not me, my lad!" McCarty spoke with easy assurance. "Inspector Druet got you too, the other day, but he didn't bother you then because we didn't know as much as we do now."

"By God, you'll never frame me again!" The man shrank back and a harsh, grating note came into his low tones. "You haven't got anything on me—!"

"Haven't, hey? How about the neighbor you've had next door for the past week or so?" McCarty inquired while Dennis held his breath. "Look here, Porter, I suppose you have been pretty well hounded and I don't want to be hard on you but I'm going to get the truth!"

" 'Neighbor!' " The pseudo-Roberts moistened his dry lips. "I don't know what you're talking about—!"

"Maybe Mr. Parsons does, then; we'll see him." McCarty made as though to push his way past the cowering figure and the man threw out his hands.

"For God's sake don't, just when he's giving me the only square chance I've had!" It was more an agonized whisper than speech. "I'm Porter all right but he knows that! He knows I got railroaded and you bulls wouldn't let me go straight afterwards; that's why he took me in. I don't know what you're trying to hang on me now but you're not going to drag him into it! What do you want of me?"

McCarty glanced down the long hall which seemed almost bare in its lofty austerity, in spite of the richness of the carved paneling and quaint old furniture.

"Take us some place where we can talk without anybody butting in," McCarty suggested. "It's for your own sake, man! If you'll come clean—?"

"I've heard that before!" Porter shrugged, with a shadow of a dreary smile. "Come along back to my pantry if you want to, but why don't you take me right downtown now and be done with it? If you're out to frame me, cut all the bluff!"

"Did I ever?" demanded McCarty. "Did I ever try to send you or any other guy up unless I had the straight goods on them?"

"I guess not, Mac. I haven't got anything against you but I've had a rough deal; what's come now is just the luck of the game, I suppose." He closed the pantry door carefully behind them and motioning to chairs he leaned back against the table, gripping its edge with his thin hands. "What do you want to know? I'll come clean all right—about myself."

McCarty noted the almost imperceptible pause and asked quickly:

"How long have you been out this time?"

"A year and a half. My lungs went back on me and I would have been a goner if I hadn't got pardoned, but what good did it do me? Every time I got a job clerking in a drug store one of the Narcotic Squad came along with my record and I was kicked out. My record—God! And I wasn't guilty! I never knew my boss was crooked and in with the dope ring, making me the scapegoat!" His voice had roughened again with a sort of savage earnestness. "I was about at the end of my rope but the—the man who'd had me pardoned was keeping his eye on me all the time and saw how hard I'd tried and—and so Mr. Parsons took me on here to give

me a breathing spell. Anything else—about me—you want to know?"

"Yes." McCarty replied on a sudden inspiration. "You were tried with Radley, weren't you, and convicted of sending that poisoned candy—?"

He paused and Porter shrugged again.

"What's the comedy for? You got that from headquarters, and nobody's making a secret of it. It was that old charge, the record of that first case that convicted me again and it helped convict Radley, too, for we were both of us innocent—but what's the use of telling that to you now?"

"There'll be a lot of use in telling us, for your own sake, what you had to do with the crush-out last month."

"Nothing. I haven't been outside these gates since I came in June."

"Then you didn't know anything about it till Radley showed up here a couple of weeks ago?"

"I don't know anything about it now, except what I read in the papers." Porter faced him squarely. "What do you mean about Radley showing up?"

"You didn't hide him in that empty house next door and smuggle food and drinks, and a razor and clothes in to him, did you?" McCarty paused for a moment again, but Porter maintained a dogged silence and he went on: "Does Benjamin Parsons know of it? 'Twill be news to him to hear that after him taking you in and all, you've been making him accessory after a crush-out—!"

"He's accessory to nothing!" Porter interrupted. "I know the law, for I have bitter reason to! He's a fine old man and believes in giving everybody a fair chance, especially if they've been framed, but he'd do nothing

against the law even if he thinks it's in the wrong. You've no proof that Radley was here or that any one helped him to hide but I'm glad he made his getaway, glad! I hope to God he's never caught to go back to that hell!"

"Even though you go, now?" McCarty demanded. "You've one chance to keep clear of it, Porter, and you'll not be giving Radley away, either. We're wise already that 'twas you helped him to hide and then make his getaway, but 'tis not Radley we're after now except as the alarm has gone out to the whole Force. We're on another lay entirely but we just want to find out when he beat it away from the Mall and how he got out. I never gave my word yet that I broke it, and I'm giving it now that 'twill not be from me nor Riordan either a hint will get out about your part in all this."

"You mean you're not here to frame me nor kid me into snitching on Radley?" A faint tremor of hope ran through his tones as he gazed searchingly into the honest, square-jawed face before him. "You've got a name for fair play, Mac, and you're on to enough already to put me away again if you want to, so what I tell you can't matter.—It won't hurt George Radley either, as it happens."

Dennis started violently and McCarty asked:

"Why can't it? You don't mean he's croaked?"

"I mean I don't know any more than you do when he beat it or how he passed the gates, and that's the God's truth!" Porter responded slowly, his gaunt, sallow face twitching. "I read about his escape in the papers as I told you and when the days passed and he wasn't caught

I was happy thinking he had got clean away but I never dreamed of him turning up here! Late one afternoon, though,—never mind how long ago—I opened the side door to find him all but leaning against it, weak from hunger and thirst and fairly desperate. He'd got past the watchman during a rainstorm a night or two before to try to reach me, his old pal, and he'd been hiding in that empty house next door, without food or water, not daring to come openly and ask for me. When I didn't show myself he made up his mind to beat it, but he found he couldn't get out as easy as he'd got in, and he was near crazy!"

"That'll be a week ago last Saturday." McCarty nodded. "When you came on him he was just after grabbing a kid that lives on the block here and searching his pockets to see could he find if the lad had a key to the gates—!"

"Glory be!" Dennis ejaculated beneath his breath.

"Yes. He was half off his head, but he didn't hurt the boy any, only scared him. I made him go back next door and lay low till the search was over, and after night-fall I took him some bread and meat and a bottle of rare old port from the cellar. It was stealing, and poor return for all the old gentleman has done for me, but George needed it bad, and I figured I owed most to him. He needed clothes too, but mine fitted him, and I didn't have to steal money for him either, because the old gentleman pays me good and I'd been nowhere to spend it. The trouble was how to get him through the gates, for after the scare he'd given the boy both watchmen were leery of strangers and if he was held up and questioned I knew he'd go to pieces from the long strain

he'd been under, and it would be all up with him." Porter reached for a silver jug of icewater which stood on the table beside him and drank deeply, then replaced it with a sigh of relief. "No one has keys except the families themselves and I'd no chance to borrow Miss Parsons', of course, nor her niece, Miss Hester's. The old gentleman carries his on a ring and sleeps with it under his pillow and though I tried twice to get it he woke up both times; I had a job of it to explain what I was doing in his room and I didn't dare risk it again. George was getting wild with the waiting and worry, and took to prowling out at night in spite of all I could say; I was getting pretty desperate myself when all at once he'd gone, and that's all I know."

He straightened his narrow shoulders as though a load were lifted from them and McCarty rose.

"When did you see him last?"

"Sunday night late when I went to take him some food. I handed it in through the window and we talked for a minute, but I didn't dare stay longer. George was almost ready to give himself up, for his nerve was gone and it was all I could do to persuade him to wait. We'd arranged that I was to go to him every other night—I couldn't risk it oftener—so I didn't miss him Monday. Last evening I got some rolls, a cold pheasant and a half-bottle of burgundy and waited under the window as long as I dared, but he didn't come and finally I took down the loose iron bars and let myself in. There wasn't the least sign of a light from his candle and he didn't answer when I took a chance and called, so I left the food and came away, but I was awake all night worrying and towards morning I went back and got the stuff, which hadn't been touched. I was afraid

the cook would miss the pheasant and it might be found and traced; I never thought about the wine bottles!"

"So he might have got away any time from Sunday night on?"

"That's right. I'm giving it to you straight, Mac, and I knew when I saw you an hour ago that you'd be after me sooner or later, especially when Miss Parsons—the old gentleman's sister, Miss Priscilla—heard a noise next door and told me to notify the watchman! I was afraid it was all up with us last week when Inspector Druet came, but it was about that valet from across the street who was poisoned and the inspector didn't even let on he recognized me."

"Do you know the kid that Radley tried to get a key off of?" McCarty ignored the observation.

"Only by sight. Red-haired, isn't he, and lives next door to where that valet worked? I see him now and then going by on the other side of the street."

"Have you seen him since he got that scare?"

"Oh, yes." Porter smiled faintly in surprise. "Only a day or so ago. George didn't mean to scare him even, —he wouldn't harm a fly!—but the thought of those gates shutting him in as though he was back up the river almost drove him mad!"

"You've been here since June, you say, Porter? Did you know that valet who died?"

"No. I think I've seen him with the butler from the next house, but I don't want to know any of them. I was glad enough to stay here and do a servant's work myself till I could get my nerve back to go out and hunt up my own kind of a position again where the bulls wouldn't keep moving me on." He smiled again, but bitterly. "I guess there isn't a chance of that now with

you on! I'm not sorry, though; I'd do it again for George! He was innocent, the same as me, and look what was done to him!"

"If I find you've come clean I'll keep my word, Porter," McCarty reiterated as he moved toward the door with Dennis in tow. "You may not know it but I'm not on the Force any longer, nor connected with headquarters except to mix in now and then for old times' sake, and the inspector didn't recognize you the other day; he kind of knew your face but he couldn't place you. Riordan and me will just forget you laid eyes on Radley unless it comes to a showdown, and then we'll do what we can for you."

Cutting short the ex-convict's broken thanks they took their departure, to find Inspector Druet pacing impatiently back and forth before the two closed houses opposite and Dennis' comments on the interview just ended were necessarily curtailed.

"Did you get any dope from Parsons?" the inspector asked.

"We didn't even see him," McCarty parried. "I was getting a line on the servants; do you recall saying you'd seen one or two of them before? Have you thought where?"

"Lord, no! I've had enough else on my mind! I had an idea one of the housemaids and the page-boy who runs errands looked familiar, but there wasn't anything out of the ordinary about them."

Dennis coughed and McCarty remarked hastily:

"I guess none of them knows what's become of the man who has been hiding next door, nor anything about the Goddard lad and that's all that matters right now, isn't it, sir? Did you get the keys to these houses?"

"Yes, and explained again to that fool of a watchman, Jennings. I had time to look around pretty thoroughly outside them while I waited for you and I couldn't find a window or door that had been tampered with. Let's see what's inside."

One o'clock had come and gone and another hour passed before they emerged from the second of the two houses after a fruitless search. Dust and mold were all they had encountered in the huge, echoing, partially dismantled rooms and the footprints they themselves left behind them were the only recent signs of human presence.

Dennis blinked and drew in the fresh air deeply when they stood once more in the sunlight.

" 'Tis like coming out of a tomb!" he averred. "What's it to be now, inspector?"

"I'm going to Goddard and make him talk!" that official responded with a certain grimness which was eloquent. "Until he comes across with his suspicions as to who kidnapped the boy our hands are tied and every hour counts. You two had better get a bite to eat and meet me at his house later."

Nothing loth, they accepted the hint. It was mid-afternoon before they approached the east gate of the Mall again, to find Jennings energetically engaged in driving away a swarthy vendor of toy balloons, whose basket freighted with globes of bright, crude color bobbing on slender sticks, resembled an uprooted garden patch of strange, grotesque blooms.

"They're a pest, those peddlers!" he declared as he admitted them. "They're not so bad, though, as the reporters that have been trying to get in since you left! Say, did you know Horace Goddard is lost—?"

"Sure we know it!" McCarty interrupted. "Didn't Trafford tell you so himself yesterday afternoon?—Hurry, Denny!"

Leaving the watchman staring speechlessly, they quickened their pace toward the Goddard house and were passing the entrance door of Orbit's when it was flung open and Ching Lee appeared.

For once the Chinaman's wooden impassivity had deserted him. His slant-eyes were rolling wildly, his yellow face distorted and his queue streaked out behind him like a tail as he plunged down the steps and seized McCarty with an iron grip of long-nailed, tapering fingers.

"The nurse-baby!" he babbled, his singsong voice high and shrill. "The Flench maid of next-door baby! Come quick!"

"Lucette, do you mean? The Bellamy child's nurse?" McCarty halted. "Stop chattering like a monkey and tell me where is she, and what's the matter?"

"Lucette!" Ching Lee nodded vigorously and pointed in at the open windows of the conservatory. "She is the next! She has breathed the breath of death!"

CHAPTER XIII

"THE HORROR DEEPENS!"

"'THE breath of death!'" Dennis repeated, awe-struck. "God save us, what's that? Are you trying to say that the French girl is in Orbit's house, *dead?*"

"We'll soon see!" Shaking off the Chinese butler's grip McCarty dashed up the steps and in at the door, with Dennis just behind and Ching Lee bringing up the rear, chanting a weird refrain of lamentation.

The door of the huge conservatory also stood wide and its humid breath, heavy with fragrance, stole out to meet them, the silent organ with slender pipes gleaming softly like silver birches in moonlight looming up in the semi-gloom, but a group at the marble bench facing it stood out against the background of leafy palms and thorny cacti, holding their eyes irresistibly in dread fascination.

Orbit's tall figure, the Bellamy baby clasped tightly in his arms, stood before it. Beside him Jean, the houseman, was bending forward while little Fu Moy knelt at its foot. On the bench itself a slender form lay relaxed as though in sleep, the head with its bright hair rippling from beneath the trim little bonnet resting against the high, white stone back, the small gloved hands limply extended at either side.

McCarty halted for an instant and Dennis crossed

himself but Ching Lee darted forward and seizing Fu Moy dragged him away as though from the mouth of some unnameable peril. Then Orbit turned, his face white and set, and McCarty advanced to meet him.

"Thank Heaven, it is you!" The resonant, well-modulated voice was hoarse and shaken. "Ching Lee thought he caught a glimpse of you passing and I told him to rush after you! McCarty, look—look at this girl! What is this horror that has come to my house!"

"Is it—dead, she is?" McCarty's own tones were reverently low. "How did it happen? What was she doing here?"

"Listening to the organ! She was to all appearances as bright and well as this little child but when I finished playing and turned, she was as you see her now! I feel as though I were going mad, as though I couldn't credit the evidence of my own eyes! What can this fearful thing mean!"

"We'd better be finding out, Mr. Orbit!" McCarty was rapidly recovering from the first shock and his quick mind leaped to meet the exigencies of the tragic situation. "Denny, run next door to Goddard's and get the inspector but not a word to anybody else!—Jean, take the little one home to the other house and tell Mrs. Bellamy that her nursemaid's took sick here but will be over it in a little while and she's not to bother; understand? Think you can put it so's she won't come tearing in here to make a scene?"

Jean straightened and nodded, not trusting himself to speak. His sensitive face was working but he controlled his emotions by a valiant effort and took the baby whom his employer held mechanically out to him. Little Maude

broke into a low wail of dismay at the abrupt transition and stretched out wavering, dimpled arms to the familiar but strangely inattentive figure on the bench. Her sobs echoed back to them as she was borne quickly from the room.

"Now, Mr. Orbit, what did you do when you turned from the organ and saw Lucette stretched out like this on the bench?" McCarty began. "Where was the baby? How did Ching Lee and Jean know that something was wrong,—did you call them? Have you sent for anybody else?"

Orbit passed his hand across his forehead as if dazed and the other noticed that it came away glistening with moisture.

"For the doctor, of course!" He replied to the last question first. "Allonby, around on the next block. I haven't had a physician for years myself, but some of my neighbors swear by him. I told Ching Lee to telephone to him as soon as I could make myself realize that —that she was gone!"

A slight shudder ran through him and he averted his gaze from the rounded, childish face, relaxed as though in sleep, save that the bright blue eyes were dull and staring widely at the lofty ceiling.

"She wasn't dead, then, the first glimpse you had of her after you stopped playing?" McCarty himself did not find it easy to continue, with that silent, dominant presence before them.

"I don't know—but she must have been, of course! She didn't move and there was no sign of her breath! I can't understand it! What frightful thing can have stricken her?"

"Suppose you tell me from the beginning." McCarty

restrained his impatience. "How did she and the child come here?"

"I was seated here alone at the organ, improvising as I do when I am disturbed in mind, for this misfortune to little Horace affected me deeply." He paused as though to collect himself, glanced again with a shudder at the body of the young French girl and turned away. "The room seemed overpoweringly warm and I went to the window there and opened it wider to see Lucette and the baby just outside, listening. The child is entranced with music and once or twice before Lucette has brought her in at my invitation; Mrs. Bellamy is much amused at little Maude's devotion to me. When I saw them standing there I suggested that they come in and myself opened the door for them. Lucette seated herself there where you see her now and took the baby up on her lap. I returned to the organ, really forgetting their presence the moment I was seated again before it. Handel's 'Largo' came into my thoughts, although it is scarcely the sort of thing to appeal to a child and I played it through to the end. In the silence, as the last notes died away, the patter of little feet running across the marble floor recalled my guests to my mind and I turned. Little Maude was playing about that palm over there, trying to reach the lowest of its broad leaves but Lucette was—as you see her. I don't know—I can't recall what I thought for the moment—possibly that she had fallen asleep or was still relaxed under the spell of the music, but almost instantly it came to me that something was wrong. I called her name sharply, I remember, and hurried to her side but before I touched her I seemed to know the truth—that she was dead!"

"You didn't move her, Mr. Orbit? The position of the body is just the same?"

"I raised one of her hands to feel her pulse but there was no slightest beat beneath my fingers and I lowered it to the bench and drew her head forward. One look was enough and I let it roll back once more, calling for Ching Lee. The baby had trotted over to me and I took her up in my arms to keep her from approaching Lucette. I think it was Jean who appeared first, but Ching Lee came immediately after and I told him to send for the doctor; when he came back from the telephone he said you were passing and I had him stop you." Orbit passed a shaking hand once more across his forehead. "What could have brought death to that girl, McCarty? I'm not ignorantly superstitious but it seems as if some horrible, malign thing were settling down over us here in the Mall and the horror deepens! First Hughes, then Horace's disappearance and now this inexplicable tragedy right under my roof, in my very presence! It is enough to shake a man's reason!"

"You're sure you were alone in the house, with just the servants, I mean?" McCarty had advanced to the body again and was scrutinizing it carefully without touching it. "Those front windows are flush with the sidewalk but nobody could have climbed in very well in broad daylight with the watchman patrolling the block. How about that glass wall where it bulges out? The lower panes open as well as the upper ones, don't they?"

He pointed to the farther side of the room built out like a huge bay-window and Orbit nodded.

"Of course, but they are never touched, except for an hour on the hottest of summer days; the tropical orchids

banked there would die instantly if a cool breeze blew over them and the sections of glass can only be reached with a long pole. No one could force a way through the plants without leaving some trace or making their presence known. There is a French window in the card-room which is probably open and a person might enter unseen from the court between this house and Goddard's, and the kitchen or tradesmen's door may have been left ajar." He spoke slowly as if to himself. "The cook is out and Jean, Ching Lee and Fu Moy are the only others in the house besides myself. Great heavens, Sir Philip arrives this evening! I had a wire from him!"

"That's the English gentleman who's on his way from the West? Sir Philip Dever—something?" McCarthy recalled their conversation of the previous day.

"Sir Philip Devereux. He comes at a most inopportune moment!" Orbit groaned. "This poor girl—McCarty, there must be some rational explanation!"

"What did Ching Lee mean?" McCarty asked suddenly. "When he grabbed me outside in the street there he said Lucette had 'breathed the breath of death.' It didn't seem only a Chinese way of expressing himself. Have you an idea what he could have been getting at?"

"Is that what he said?" Orbit walked quickly over to the nearest orchid and indicated the great distended purple bloom shot with angry streaks of livid orange-yellow. "There is what he meant, one of the rarest of my specimens and a hybrid, a cross between two of the least-known varieties of orchid in Central America. The natives down there regard it as poison and believe that to inhale its odor, which is rank and nauseous, means death. There is an old superstition among them that it is

part vegetable and part animal life and that the curious vibration of its petals—so like pulsation, do you see it?—is the act of breathing; to smell it is to take its breath, to die. Ching Lee heard me telling this to some guests one evening and nothing could ever induce him to approach it since. There is nothing in the idea, however; the plant isn't poisonous in any way, but I suppose that was the first thought that occurred to his mind when he saw Lucette lying dead."

McCarty edged cautiously over toward it but footsteps sounded in the hall and Jean presented himself at the door.

"Madame Bellamy is not at home, but Snape took the little Maude to place in the care of one of the maids," he reported. "He say that he will explain to Madame.—The docteur is not come?"

Before Orbit or McCarty could reply the doorbell rang and he hurried away to admit Dennis and the inspector. The latter had evidently been prepared by his companion, for he glanced hastily at the body and then turned to Orbit.

"How long has she been dead?" he asked.

"I don't know; about twenty minutes I should say, inspector. It occurred while I was playing rather a lengthy movement on the organ and I wasn't aware of it until I had finished." Orbit started as the bell pealed again and added in relief: "That must be Doctor Allonby now!"

Jean ushered in a slender, dapper man who greeted Orbit by name, nodded with suddenly alert interest when the inspector and his deputies were introduced and then advanced to the body.

While he examined it the four grouped themselves

about him, but Jean crept to the door and joined Ching Lee who was hovering just outside. They whispered together but the others waited in tense silence.

Finally the doctor straightened.

"This woman has been killed by the inhalation of some gas, some poisonous fumes, but of what nature I am unable to determine," he announced, gazing from Orbit to the inspector with keen incisiveness. "I have never encountered a similar case but the symptoms admit of no other diagnosis. They are like and yet unlike some of those I noted on the battlefields of France a few years ago, but undoubtedly death was induced by asphyxiation of an exceedingly uncommon form; the autopsy will reveal its nature."

The inhalation of poisonous fumes! McCarthy heard a faint but high-pitched ejaculation in the hall, in Ching Lee's chattering tones. Involuntarily his eyes strayed to the distorted, bulbous, luridly glowing orchid, which seemed in the shadows to be moving, reaching out toward them! Could it have been the "breath of death" indeed? He felt the nerves crawl beneath his skin and his scalp tingled, but the matter-of-fact voice of the inspector recalled him to stern facts.

"How long would you say she'd been dead, Doctor?"

"Not much more than half an hour; the body is still warm. You have taken charge here?"

The inspector nodded.

"Then I may suggest that you notify your medical examiner without delay. I understand that this death is—er—a mystery, Mr. Orbit?"

"An unaccountable one, Doctor Allonby. I was here in the room at the time it occurred, playing the organ over there and Lucette and the baby—this young girl

was the nurse for Mrs. Bellamy's child next door—were seated on this bench."

The doctor started and asked quickly:

"The child! What has become of it?"

"The houseman took it home after you were summoned," Orbit replied.

"But it was unharmed? The child was seated here beside the nurse?"

"Oh, no!" Orbit interrupted. "While I played it had climbed down and was amusing itself over by that palm."

"A miraculous escape!" the doctor exclaimed. "Had it remained here it would undoubtedly have met with the same death which overcame the nurse. Was that window open just as it is now, the one directly behind those plants back of the bench?"

The doctor had never taken his eyes from Orbit's face and it seemed to McCarty that his tones had quickened.

"Just as you see it now," affirmed Orbit. "Nothing has been disturbed or changed in any way. But, Doctor, are you positive of your diagnosis? I am not questioning your knowledge but this terrible affair is utterly inexplicable to me! I heard nothing, saw no one! When I seated myself before the organ Lucette was to all casual appearances a perfectly normal young woman glowing with health; when I turned from it a few minutes later she was stretched there dead! The child was absolutely unconcerned and I am sure she had noticed nothing; she is a shy little creature, uneasy in the presence of strangers, and if any one had stolen in and approached the nurse it seems incredible that she would not have cried out or run to me. Thank heaven she is old enough to talk, we may be able to learn something from her later."

"That is an important point," conceded the doctor.

"When you approached the body did you notice any peculiar odor on the air? It would have been pungent, irritating, almost choking.—Think, Mr. Orbit! You must have been conscious of some foreign, highly chemicalized odor, even if it were almost instantly dissipated."

There was a pause and then Orbit slowly shook his head.

"I was conscious of no such odor," he replied. "It is odd, for I am peculiarly sensitive to things of that sort but then I was overwhelmed with the shock of what had taken place. As soon as I realized the girl was dead I called the servants—they might have detected this odor you speak of.—Jean! Ching Lee!"

The two advanced reluctantly from the hall, but in answer to the physician's queries supplemented by more brusk ones from the inspector, they could reply only in the negative. Jean had been polishing some brasses in a nearby room and heard Mr. Orbit call Ching Lee; he had thought it strange that he did not ring as usual, and when he called again there was something in his voice that made Jean think he needed help. He rushed in and saw the girl stretched upon the bench and Mr. Orbit standing there with little Maude in his arms. Ching Lee had entered just behind him and their stammered stories corroborated that of their employer in every detail. They had noticed no odor but that of the plants all about and they were quite certain they had seen no stranger lurking in the immediate vicinity, to say nothing of getting into the house itself. They had both been on the lower floor all the afternoon.

"I live on the next street and I shall be glad to render any assistance possible to your medical examiner," Doc-

tor Allonby turned to the inspector and there was an oddly repressed note in his tones. "I will look up this case among my notes and try to ascertain the nature of the chemicals used to generate the gas or vapor which caused this young woman's death, meanwhile holding myself at your disposal.—Mr. Orbit, I regret that I arrived too late to be of real service, but in any event the end must have come almost instantaneously."

He bowed, still with that guarded air of repression, and left the room, Ching Lee accompanying him to the door. Orbit shrugged, throwing out his hands in a hopeless gesture.

"You saw? I believe the man actually thinks I am withholding some facts from him!—But who wouldn't? I can't bring myself to believe it either, even with that poor girl's body here before us! It is awful—awful!"

He sank down upon a low stone seat, resting his head upon his hands and the inspector observed:

"Poison gas! That's a new one on me, except for the carbon monoxide generated from motor cars standing in enclosed spaces. I never was connected with the Bomb Squad but I thought most of that stuff had to be exploded. You didn't hear anything, did you, while you were playing?"

"Not a sound. The 'Largo' is not necessarily thunderous in volume but it has swelling chords which would have effectually smothered any slight noise. What are we to do now, inspector? I am in your hands."

"Where's your telephone? I've got to notify headquarters and get the medical examiner. That's the first step, as the doctor said. . . . Of course I want no one to leave this house!"

"Assuredly not!" Orbit lifted his head. "Ching Lee,

show Inspector Druet to the telephone and then see that Fu Moy remains quietly upstairs until he is sent for."

Ching Lee bowed and followed the official from the room. Dennis, who had been fearfully regarding the body of the dead girl, moved toward McCarty.

"By all that's unholy, what's doing around here!" he whispered audibly. "Are the powers of darkness let loose, entirely? Poison gas, my eye! Mac, how would anybody be reaching her except with a squirt-gun or a grenade through that window?"

"Who gave Hughes that poison that not one in a thousand has ever heard of, and how was the Goddard kid snatched from off the face of the earth?" McCarty retorted but in a cautiously lowered tone. He had approached the bench once more and was gazing down at the still figure. "You remember what Ching Lee said? Lucette was the 'next.' He don't think this devilment is goin' to stop even here and no more do I, unless our luck turns and we can stamp it out! This girl, now—"

He paused, staring down seemingly at the small feet encased in their neat shoes which peeped out from beneath a fold of her skirt, and Dennis drew back with a shiver.

"It turns me fair sick to look at her! To think we was only talking to her this morning!—It seems to me there is a kind of a funny smell on the air! Don't you get it, Mac? Maybe it's something that creeps over you gradual, and before we know it we could be corpses ourselves! I'd like well to be out of this room!"

" 'Tis your imagination and not that nose you brag of that's working now!" McCarty thrust his foot forward in a pushing motion until his knee struck smartly

against the edge of the stone seat on which Lucette's body lay. "There's no smell whatever, barring the scent of the flowers! Himself has been here through it all, remember."

He indicated with a jerk of his head the seat where the bowed figure rested, and at that moment the inspector reëntered the conservatory.

"Mr. Orbit, is there any other entrance to this room besides that door?"

Orbit looked up and then rose slowly, shaking his head.

"None, but the windows are open as you see—"

"We'll close and fasten them and then lock this door behind us. I want everything in here left undisturbed until the medical examiner comes. Take us somewhere private where we can talk; I'll have to get every detail connected with this straight for my report."

"My study, upstairs?" Orbit suggested.

"All right. Riordan, close the windows, will you, and fix the catches?" The inspector turned and fumbled with the key in the lock as Dennis started for the windows and Orbit, after a last horror-stricken glance at the dead girl, preceded the others from the room.

McCarty eyed his superior's back for a moment then stooped quickly and drew out from under the bench the object he had carefully kicked there a minute or two before; it was a slender stick with a wad of shrivelled, limp blue rubber dependent from one end. Snapping the stick he thrust it back beneath the bench again and placed the fragment with the clinging, clammily resilient pouch in his pocket. Then he, too, glanced once more at Lucette's dead face as though ratifying some agreement between them and turned to follow his superior.

CHAPTER XIV

THE BLUE BALLOON

ORBIT told of the afternoon's tragic experience again in detail for the inspector's benefit and McCarty and Dennis listened carefully, but it differed in no way from his first description. At its conclusion the medical examiner's assistant was announced. The inspector descended with Orbit but McCarty and his colleague discreetly effaced themselves.

"We're leaving just when it's getting good!" Dennis sighed with morbid relish as they went down the steps and out into the lengthening shadows of late afternoon. "I'd like to have had a good look by ourselves around that conservatory! That doctor may be all right for the fashionable, expensive ailments of the crowd around this neighborhood, but I've been fighting fires too long not to know what asphyxiation means and 'twas not that killed the poor young thing in that great vault of a room with the windows open wide behind her!—How the devil do you suppose she did come to die, Mac?"

"I'm past guessing!" McCarty confessed. "'Tis the worst case since ever I went on the Force, and we're up against the cleverest murdering wretch that's been loosed on the world! You'll mind I told you once that brains and not brawn was back of it all? Brains it is, with the genius of them twisted and gone wrong, and a knowledge of poisons and such that means the learning of a lifetime!

We'll slip around to the back of the house and wait till the medical lad from headquarters has gone. I'm thinking there's more besides us would like a minute or two in that conservatory!"

"Why?" Dennis looked startled. "Is something hid there, do you mean? How could it be, with the servants around all the time and Orbit right there in the room? 'Tis the first murder ever I heard of that could be pulled off with a man playing the organ not twenty feet away and a little child running about in the midst of it and neither of them the wiser! There's the baby now!"

They had reached the rear court and in the tradesmen's entrance of the Bellamy house next door a buxom housemaid appeared with little Maude in her arms. She stood eyeing them in undisguised curiosity and interest and McCarty lifted his hat, approaching her with a bland smile.

"Maudie's after having a new nurse, I see!" he began ingratiatingly. " 'Tis a pity Lucette took sick back there in Mr. Orbit's—"

"How is she?" the woman interrupted. "What happened to her? I know who you are; you're from the police trying to find out who killed the valet from in there."

McCarty acknowledged the recognition with a bow as graceful as his girth permitted.

"You've got us right. We just happened to be on hand to-day when Lucette got sick; she'd brought the baby in to hear Mr. Orbit play and he told Jean to bring her back home while the doctor was coming. I guess that French girl's pretty bad but they didn't tell us what was the matter with her."

"Lucette!" The child had caught a familiar name.

"Maudie wants Lucette!—Wants to hear mans play adain!"

She struggled to free herself and the woman stooped and set her on her feet but kept a careful grip on the fluffy skirts.

"She's a handful!" Her tone was exasperated. "It was all I could do to get her quiet and now she's started hollering again! Lucette's got a wonderful knack with her, and patience too, and Maudie's took a great fancy to her, considering the little while she's been here. She's a nice girl and I can't think what's ailing her, for she was all right when she started out with the baby for a walk this afternoon."

"Want to walk *now!*" Maudie announced making an abortive dive forward. "Want to go to Lucette."

"Hello, there!" McCarty held out a stubby forefinger and Maudie looked up at him for a moment, then shyly clasped her chubby hand about it. "What happened to your pretty balloon?"

" 'Balloon?' " Her other hand went to her mouth and she sucked her thumb reflectively.

"Sure," McCarty urged encouragingly while Dennis stared at him in surprise. "The grand blue balloon you had. What's become of it? Did you break it?"

"She had no balloon—," the woman began, but Maudie was of another mind.

"*Did* have!" she contradicted flatly. "Lucette buyed it."

"Off of a wop—I mean, a man—with a big basket full of them down by the gate?" McCarty asked. "A big basket with a lot of balloons, red and blue and purple ones?"

Maudie nodded.

"Big bastik!" she affirmed. "Lucette buyed balloon an' I tooked it into the man's house where he made the music."

She was evidently trying hard to remember and McCarty waited but the effort proving vain he prompted:

"You broke the balloon while the man was making the music, didn't you?—When you got down off Lucette's lap to play around, didn't you break the pretty balloon?"

"Didn't bwoke it!" Maudie shook her curls decidedly. "Dave it to Lucette."

"Whilst the man was making the music?" McCarty persisted.

"No. Lucette tooked it when we went into the man's house, where the garden is an' the fing that makes the music.—Want my balloon!"

The corners of the rosebud mouth drooped pitifully and a premonitory moisture dimmed her eyes.

"What did Lucette do with it, do you know?"

The question was beyond Maudie, however, and she could only reiterate:

"Want Lucette! Want my balloon!"

"Did Lucette have many friends here in this country, do you think?" McCarty gave it up at last and addressed the housemaid, who fortunately did not note that he voiced his query in the past tense.

"No, she hasn't. She's got plenty of followers, if that's what you mean, but she's real sensible for such a young thing and don't bother with them. She would not have gone in Mr. Orbit's house if that Hughes had been alive, though; she hated the sight of him and small blame to her!"

McCarty chuckled.

"He was a gay lad, from all accounts! But I guess there are others that Lucette hates too, eh? She's kind of afraid of somebody, isn't she?"

"Not that I know of!" The woman tossed her head as she caught up the protesting Maudie once more. "I've no call to be talking about her to a stranger, anyway! Get along with your nonsense!"

McCarty laughed again good-naturedly.

"A bit of gossip does no harm! But we've work to do, Denny and me. Good-by, Maudie!"

"By-by!" that young person responded graciously, and the two departed for the Orbit house.

"What for were you asking the kid about the balloon?" Dennis asked, when they were out of earshot of the woman who still stood in the door watching them. "I saw none anywhere near the girl's body! How did you know she'd bought one for the child?"

"What would that wop have been hanging around the gate for, if he'd not sold one already in here and hoped to get rid of more?" McCarty countered. "Who else would be wanting balloons when there's no other kid on the block since the Burminster girl's not back from the country and Horace Goddard's gone?"

"'Gone,' it is!" Dennis' voice lowered fearfully. "I feel it in my bones, Mac, that the boy will never turn up alive!—There goes the car with the medical examiner's assistant. They'll be sending now for the body and then 'twill be all over the neighborhood!—Who in the devil is back of it all?"

"Who'll be the next one marked for death or disappearance?" retorted McCarty. "'Tis that has me worried now, for the hell-hound is working faster and faster as if the killing fever was getting the best of him. By that

same token, that's my one hope; that 'twill get the best of his shrewdness and cunning, and he'll give himself away! That's the question now, Denny; who'll be the next?"

They reëntered the Orbit house, by way of the tradesmen's entrance, to find that André the cook had returned and was visibly wrought up over the fate of his countrywoman. His hands trembled as he shelled chestnuts for a glacé and dire threats issued in a choked monotone from beneath the fiercely bristling mustache.

"That Hughes should have been taken, perhaps it was the hand of fate or le bon Dieu, for he was of use to no one in the world except m'sieu, and a perfect valet is easily found, especially among the French, but that the little Horace should be made to disappear and now Lucette the beautiful one is kill'—it shall be for the revenge!"

"You're right, it shall!" McCarty returned grimly. "André, do you know the Parsons' cook across the street?"

"It is a she!" André looked up with a shrug of unutterable contempt. "A woman big like a brigadier with three moles upon her cheek! How should she know the art of the cuisine?—But what would you? They are of the old bourgeoisie, these Parsons. I am not acquaint' with the Amazon of the three moles!"

"Did ever you notice the eyes of her?" McCarty asked suddenly. "Do they be looking two ways at once?"

"But yes!" André stared. "It is as though she would see behind of her. Has she, then, tell to you something of value to your search?"

"She'd have to see more than just behind her to do that, André!"

They left him still muttering and passed through the pantries and down the hall toward the front, but Mc-

Carty drew Dennis hastily back as the doorbell sounded vociferously.

"That'll be the ambulance to take the body to the morgue for the autopsy," he whispered. "The medical examiner's assistant must have 'phoned for it before he left, that it's here so quick. We'll just be laying low till it's gone."

"And we've no chance for another look at the corpse!" Dennis mourned.

"What for? 'Twould help us none and 'tis not from what's already happened we'll find out the truth, but from what's maybe coming! It's as well to have the poor thing's body out of the way."

In silence, then, they listened to the heavy tramp of feet, but when the front door had closed once more McCarty beckoned to his companion and started for the conservatory. Its door stood wide, the windows had been flung open again and a slight breeze which had sprung up stirred and rustled the leaves of the palms, but nowhere did there remain any sign of the tragedy so recently enacted.

Walking over to the organ McCarty scrutinized it critically and then seating himself on the stool before it with his back to the instrument and hands outspread on his knees, he regarded the marble bench on which Lucette had met her death while Dennis shifted from foot to foot watching him. All at once, with a grunt, he doubled forward and appeared to be peering at the space beneath the bench.

"Nothing's under there." Dennis' eyes had followed the direction of his gaze. "The floor's bare and clean as the palm of your hand. What more is there here for us to see?"

"Not a thing, now," McCarty replied. Nevertheless he crossed to the windows and examined the sills before leading the way from the room.

In the hall they met Orbit. There were deep lines graven on his face by the shock and strain of the afternoon's horror and he was holding himself in such deep repression that only his eyes betrayed his emotion, glowing darkly like live coals in an ashen pallor.

"It is—all over?" he asked in a hushed tone. "Jean tells me the body has been removed and the conservatory thrown open again. I would gladly close it forever, I feel that I can never touch the organ, but I suppose that is morbid. Whatever mysterious, horrible thing came to destroy that girl we can be thankful that the baby escaped! Your inspector is quite beyond his depth, I am afraid, but have you and Riordan no clue?"

"Did the medical examiner's assistant say it was poison gas did it, the same as the doctor?" McCarty evaded the question.

"He didn't express an opinion while I was there, but your inspector went away with him, perhaps for some data that may reveal the actual cause of poor Lucette's death. With all respect to Doctor Allonby I cannot convince myself that the girl was gassed; the sheer impossibility of it under the circumstances can't be overcome in my mind!—But don't let me keep you, unless, of course, there are some questions you wish to ask me?"

"Not now," McCarty shook his head. "We'll be back later, likely. You've my own 'phone number in case anything turns up?"

Orbit nodded and himself showed them out the front door. Bill Jennings met them as they approached the

east gate and launched into excited queries concerning the murder but McCarty cut him short.

"You know as much about it as we do, ourselves," he asserted. "The girl died sudden, sitting in the conservatory with the child playing around her feet and not even the doctor's sure what took her.—Bill, do you mind that balloon peddler you chased away from the gate when we were coming in? Did you ever see him hanging about before?"

"Many a time," returned the watchman promptly. "Balloons are a new line with him; it used to be peanuts and before that little plaster images. Tony, his name is,—he knows this boy coming now, that delivers the evening papers for the whole Mall. Is there anything wrong about him? He ain't ever been inside the gates while I was on!"

"Lord, no!" McCarty replied hastily. "I thought he looked kind of like a dago I used to know myself. . . . Don't let any reporters in, Bill, until we get back."

He hurried through the gate, dragging Dennis after him, and around the corner, where he came to a halt.

"I want a word with that paper-boy," he explained. "Happen he'll give us a line on this Tony; we'll collar him as he goes back."

"Balloons again!" Dennis exclaimed in disgust. "Well I know you'll not talk till your own good time but 'tis in your mind that a balloon had something to do with that girl's death! I'd better be getting back to the engine house, laying up some good sleep against to-morrow, for it's small use I'll be while you keep me in the dark!"

"I'm in the dark myself, Denny," McCarty confessed in contrition. "'Tis only a wild guess on my part, but I've a busted toy balloon in my pocket that I picked up

from the floor of that conservatory right foreninst Lucette's feet after the doctor had gone. I don't know has it anything to do with the case but 'twas the gas that balloons are sometimes filled with that put me in mind of it. I broke the stick off it and threw it under the bench and when we went back just now it was gone."

Dennis' jaw dropped.

"But how in the world could gas, poisoned or no, be put into it—?" he began. "I never heard tell of the like—!"

"Wisht! The lad's coming now!" McCarty cautioned, then stepped forward. "Hey, just a minute, sonny! Where'll I find your friend Tony, him that sells toy balloons? I saw him around here this afternoon and I want to get a dozen or so off him for an entertainment. Bill Jennings, the watchman there at the Mall, said you could tell me."

The boy, an olive-skinned lad with soft, dark eyes and a shy, ingratiating smile, pushed his cap farther back on his curly black hair.

"Tony Primavera?" he nodded. "He ought ter be t'roo bus'ness fer de day now but youse can find him over where he lives wid Joe de ice-man, in a basement on Thoid Avenyer near Eightieth. He'll have his stock dere wid him, too!"

Thanking their informant they started east to the avenue indicated, and up along that teeming thoroughfare to Eightieth Street where they readily found the steep basement stairs with the sign outside that orders for coal and ice would be taken below.

With Dennis close behind McCarty descended to the dark half-cellar, lighted dimly by a single flaring gas-jet. Besides the table and broken backed chairs, two cots

covered with soiled blankets and a stove on which a pot bubbled and gave forth a strong aroma of garlic denoted that the apartment served for living as well as business purposes, but their eyes were caught primarily by the huge basket in the corner bristling with toy balloons so that it seemed a miracle it was not lifted from the floor by its aerial freight.

"Are they the same he had with him this afternoon?" asked Dennis.

"If they are he's not sold many," responded McCarty. "Where's he gone, I wonder? 'Tis a grand sight we'll be, trailing them through the streets across town, but I'm going to find out what's inside of every last one of them this night!"

Dennis betrayed acute symptons of alarm.

"What if we find what we're looking for and the two of us keel over?" he demanded. "If you'll listen to me for once, Mac, we'll take them up to the Park in the fine fresh air and bu'st them with rocks—thrown! I'm not saying we've done such a hell of a lot so far in this investigation but we'd do less laid out cold and stiff!"

"Well do the spell-binders—of the losing party—tell us the town is going to the devil when we depend on the likes of you, that's afraid of a child's toy, to protect us if we drop a cigarette or coax the stove along with a bit of kerosene!" retorted McCarty, adding with naïve inconsistency: "That wop ain't carting poison gas around with him in ten-cent balloons, but I'm going to be sure, anyhow."

A clatter on the steps interrupted the debate and the swarthy vendor of the afternoon appeared with a round, porous loaf and a pale, bulbous cheese unwrapped beneath his arm.

"Joe's out." He jerked his thumb toward the table. "Write da ord' on da slate an' bime-by he bring it."

" 'Tis not coal nor ice we want, Tony, but some of your balloons, a lot of them," McCarty replied. "You know the kid that delivers the papers over at the New Queen's Mall? He told us where to find you, for they're giving a child's party where we work and we've got to have the balloons right away."

"How many?" Tony deposited the bread and cheese on the table with a thump and proceeded eagerly to business. "Fine-a balloon, only fifteen-a cent—!"

"A dime was what you were asking this afternoon and a dime you'll get now!" McCarty announced with decision. "How many have you there?"

The Italian shrugged philosophically and counted on his grimy fingers.

"Twenta-two." He looked up with a grimace. "Bad-a biz to-day!"

"We'll take the lot," declared his customer. "Tie the stems of them together in two bunches if you can. Here's your money."

The bargain was soon concluded and they sallied forth with their burden, but it excited so much comment, chiefly of a humorous nature, that McCarty himself was glad to subside in the depths of a taxi encountered on a side-street.

"Don't sit all over me!" he warned his companion irritably as they started anew. "You'll be bu'sting the damn things before we get home! Is it grinning the chauffeur is, the blockhead?"

" 'Tis two lunatics he thinks he's driving!" Dennis averred gloomily. "He'd grin with the other side of his mouth if he knew he was carrying a load of sudden death,

maybe!—I'll thank you to move over yourself, Timothy McCarty, and not be poking them gas-bags in my face!"

Thereafter conversation languished until they drew up before the door of McCarty's rooms. Monsieur Girard, the dealer in antiques, came to the door of his shop and raised his withered hands heaven-ward at this latest demonstration of his neighbor's eccentricity, but McCarty vouchsafed him only a curt nod and then followed Dennis, who was gingerly ascending the stairs, guarding his cargo with almost maternal solicitude.

In the living-room he deposited it in the middle of the floor and opened the windows wide before turning on the light. The balloons rose slowly ceilingward in a variegated cluster and he made a wild dive to secure them.

"Tie your bunch to the arm of the chair," McCarty directed. "We'll start with mine. Hold them till I get out my pen-knife and jab it into one."

Dennis shut his eyes tightly and holding his breath extended his long arm until the joints cracked but a sharp pop like the shot of a miniature revolver made him gasp, forgetting his caution. He opened his eyes to behold one of the balloons hanging, a mere deflated wisp, at the end of its stick.

"Nothing but plain air," McCarty commented. "'Tis not gassed you are, is it, Denny?"

"Not yet," replied Dennis with a palpable reservation. "You've twenty-one left, though!"

"We'll make short work of them!" McCarty jabbed a second balloon with his knife and the ensuing report was productive of a like harmless result.

Thereafter the air was for a space filled with a rapid succession of small detonations. When it was over and

not a balloon was left intact Dennis' apprehension gave place to disgust.

" 'Tis in our second childhood we are!" he declared. "Whatever put it into your head that the toy balloon had anything to do with the girl's death—!"

But McCarty was not listening. He had drawn from his pocket the shrivelled shred of rubber on its fragment of stick and was smoothing it out thoughtfully between his fingers. All at once he straightened.

"Denny, that first balloon we stuck the knife into was red, wasn't it?"

"Sure it was!" Denny looked his surprise.

"And the second was blue and the third green?"

"I disremember,—but what of it?"

"Look at them! Stretch them out and see if they've changed color since!" McCarty's tones shook with excitement and Dennis caught the infection. He drew the limp rubber out and scrutinized each torn balloon in turn, then shook his head.

"There's nothing different about them that I can see! What are you getting at?"

"Just this! When I picked this up it was blue, as blue as that second one we broke, and look at it now!" The rubber wisp he held out was a greenish-gray mottled with brown spots which were already disintegrating. "Denny, the others didn't change color because 'twas just air they were filled with but this is different; it's rotting before our eyes! 'Twas this child's toy held the poison gas that killed Lucette!"

CHAPTER XV

MIDNIGHT MARAUDERS

THE litter of wrecked balloons was cleared away and the one which had changed color with such sinister significance was carefully deposited in an empty tin cracker box. With pipe and cigar alight Dennis and McCarty were discussing the latest development, their fatigue forgotten in their renewed zeal.

"There's an old guy I know living far uptown that's a wizard about chemistry," McCarty observed, neglecting to mention that the "wizard" had an interesting police record. "I'll take the box with what's left of that blue balloon in it up to him, come morning, but we'll not breathe a word of it to another living soul! 'Tis somebody on the Mall or with easy access to it that's walking around with two murders and a disappearance on the conscience of him, maybe giving us fair words every day and the grand laugh behind our backs. We don't know who it is and till we do we'll be telling nothing to any of them."

"True for you!" Dennis nodded. "I'm thinking, though, 'tis on the north side of the street you'll find your man, Mac, for everything that's happened hit the three households on the south side; Orbit's valet and Goddard's son and now Mrs. Bellamy's nurse-girl. The only two houses opposite that are occupied, since the Burminsters are still away, are Five and Seven—the Sloanes' and the

Parsons'. We'll not be forgetting that Swede Otto who beat it away from the Sloanes' at the first alarm and we've not so much as crossed the doorsill there yet. Then there's the Parsons, too. They hold themselves better than their neighbors and have them that are next to royalty, no less, for company and still and all they have an ex-convict and suspected poisoner at that to buttle for them. If I was that ambassador I'd have thought twice before I stayed to lunch!"

"They've a houseful of crooks, 'ex' or no," McCarty asserted, regarding his cigar thoughtfully. "I got Porter right, but 'twas the inspector first gave me the wire without knowing it when he said the housemaid and page boy looked familiar, as if he'd seen them somewhere before but couldn't place them. Where would he have seen them, if 'twas not at headquarters or on trial? André put the last touch to it this afternoon, though."

"Orbit's cook?"

"He did that. Do you mind when I asked him if he knew the cook over at Parsons' he said it was a 'she,' a great big woman with three moles on her cheek? Jennie Malone shoved about twenty thousand dollars' worth of the queer in the best stores of the city for the Carpenter counterfeiting gang before she was pinched. She'd never have been caught at all if it hadn't been for those three moles that gave her away. Ever since André tipped me off I've been asking myself what was the rest of that household like, and did they have more reasons than one for keeping the neighbors at arm's length?"

Dennis sat forward suddenly and took his pipe from his mouth.

"Do you mean the Parsonses themselves are not on the level?" he demanded. "The old gentleman, with his

grand charities and his pious talk, the old maid sister and the young niece? Do you think the old gentleman is cracked, maybe, and turned murderer wholesale? Is it him that's planted a hotbed of crime right there in the Mall?"

"Somebody has," McCarty shrugged. "Of course the two murders happened in Orbit's house, if 'twas there Hughes got his dose of Calabar bean, and the Goddard kid disappeared from next door—"

Dennis snorted.

"Would Orbit be killing the valet that give him perfect service all these years till he can't so much as put on his own shirt for himself, no less murdering a nursegirl, and running off with a boy? None in the Bellamy household could have had a hand in Lucette's death and it stands to reason Goddard didn't kidnap his own son! Orbit's likely to be under fire now and come in for a lot of notoriety and maybe—well, there's others under that roof besides himself!"

"I've been turning that over in my mind, too." McCarty took a last pull at his cigar and laid the stub in the tray. "We've put in this evening so far breaking balloons and that's about all we've been doing since first this case started; opening up one gas-bag after another and getting nothing but empty air! I'd like a chance to go through the Parsons house and Orbit's too, with no one the wiser, and if you were not such a clumsy, heavy-footed galoot, Denny, we'd be paying them a little visit to-night without leaving our cards."

"'Clumsy,' is it!" Dennis repeated indignantly. "Me that's been scaling walls and ladders since you tramped your first beat! We've broke in an empty house there in broad day and we can get in the others at night just as

easy, in spite of what newfangled burglar alarms they may have. I'm on to most of them through fighting fires, thanks be! Since the first night we went through those gates I've felt in the soul of me that sooner or later we'd be marauding in there like a couple of second-story workers and now it's come! If instead of Parsons and his convicts it should be one of those Frenchmen or the Chink in Orbit's house, we'll spot him!"

"The first thing we spot will be the restaurant around the corner. 'Tis near ten o'clock and we've had no dinner," McCarty rejoined. "We won't be showing up near the Mall till midnight or after and we've a lot to plan first."

Their meal finished they returned again to the rooms. McCarty paused for a moment in the doorway of the living-room, a peculiar expression crossing his face.

"Sit you down and light your pipe, Denny." He threw open the closet door as he spoke. "I'll be with you in a minute. Now where—?"

He left the closet and went into the bedroom. Dennis paused in the act of tamping his pipe to listen open-mouthed, for an unaccustomed sound came to his ears. McCarty was whistling, wheezily and off-key, but there was something oddly reminiscent in the simple, insistently reiterated measure; moreover McCarty never indulged in that or any other form of melodious expression unless in a blatant attempt at dissimulation. What was he doing, anyway, that he didn't want his own pal to get on to? He'd opened and shut the door of his clothes-closet and now he was in the bathroon, still trying to whistle that funny little tune, almost like the ones Molly's kid learned at the kindergarten!

Dennis returned to his pipe, as McCarty reëntered the room.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" he asked.

McCarty reddened.

"I did not, but no matter," he replied shortly. "I unearthed an old kit of burglars' tools that I took once off of Black Matt, that'll maybe come in handy and here's a revolver for you."

"I've no use for it!" remarked Dennis hastily, regarding the weapon with small favor. "Something short and hefty is more in my line, with no trigger to go off unexpected and send me to the chair!"

"Do you think I'd trust you with it if it was loaded?" his host retorted. "'Tis only to throw a bluff if we're cornered. We'll be wearing handkerchiefs over our faces like movie burglars, for whatever comes we don't want to be recognized. It don't matter what tracks we leave behind us as long as we get clear ourselves so we'll take these nippers to cut every wire we see."

"And to-morrow there'll be a new job for us, tracking our own selves!" Dennis grinned, and then his face sobered. "We've the hardest job on our hands that ever we tackled, Mac, with this inhuman devil to lay low!"

"I've a creepy feeling that there's more than him at work." McCarty dropped the tools he had been sorting and stared reflectively into space. "I don't know how to put it, but it seems as if there was something powerful and as evil as a spirit from Hell itself that's helping the wretch in his destruction! He's getting bolder, Denny, he'll over-reach himself yet. If we could figure who's to be the next we could close in on him!"

"'Tis too deep for me." Dennis shook his head. "Is there a glass-cutter and a lump of putty in that layout?"

For more than an hour they discussed the forthcoming adventure. At midnight they left the apartment and took a roundabout way across town to the New Queen's Mall. Waiting until Dave Hollis, the night watchman, had strolled to the other end of the block, they let themselves in at the west gate and slipped into the court between the Burminster mansion and the Sloane's smaller residence next door. The original plan had been to visit Orbit's house first, but a light still glowed from the lower floor, indicating that the host and his guest, Sir Philip Devereux, had not yet retired. The Parsons establishment, however, was decorously dark, and they proceeded to its rear. There they paused to adjust handkerchiefs over the lower part of their faces and Dennis took stock of the situation. There was no moon and even the stars were partly obscured by scudding clouds, while the rising wind that swirled through the alley-like spaces between the houses betokened a coming storm.

"'Tis the equinox, no less, that's on the way!" Dennis shivered more from nervousness than chill and his voice came in a muffled whisper from beneath the handkerchief. The flashlight in his hand wavered as he directed its ray against the house wall. "Look at that, now! If the old gentleman keeps any valuables here he must think that the crooks under his roof are enough protection from them outside, for he's still depending on the old Kip electric system, that a babe in arms could disconnect! . . . Get you to the mouth of the alley, Mac, and keep an eye out for the watchman."

McCarty obeyed. When, after an interval during which Hollis had passed twice, he heard a cautious hiss behind him and returned, it was to observe loose wires dangling innocuously from the wall and a yawning aper-

ture in one of the windows where Dennis had removed a whole pane of glass.

"I made a good job of it," the latter whispered complacently. "The telephone is cut, too, and the inside burglar attachment. The old gentleman's not such a fool after all, for he's got an installation that once set would warn him if a window or outside door was touched, but I put it out of business. Take off your shoes like I did and then come on; I've fixed the catch already."

He raised the window inch by inch while McCarty removed his shoes, tied the laces together and hung them about his neck. Then Dennis crawled over the sill, drew his bulkier companion in after him and flashed his light quickly about.

"There's the door. You said not to bother with any rooms downstairs except the old gentleman's private study or sitting-room if he's got one, didn't you?"

"Yes. I can see the foot of the back stairs at the end of this hall, so shut off that light!" McCarty whispered in response. "You're breathing loud enough to wake the dead!"

They fumbled their way to the stairs and up. The silence was oppressive and to the amateur house-breakers it seemed to hold an ever-increasing menace. They padded along in their stockinged feet through the wide hall, pausing at each doorway as McCarty directed his own electric torch within, but only stately drawing-rooms and a dining-hall huge enough for a banquet met their gaze.

"Wouldn't you think he'd buy more furniture?" McCarty forgot their equivocal situation for the moment as he gazed disparagingly down a long portrait gallery, where Cavalier and Puritan forebears of the Parsons

family looked down upon a few chairs placed at wide intervals against the wall. "There are not seats enough in all the parlors to hold a decent funeral and what there is is old and dull like the junk in Girard's antique shop!"

"Maybe 'tis worth as much and more," Dennis suggested sagely. "I'm not facing jail this minute, though, for a chance to look at it!—There's a smaller room beyond that might be the old gentleman's study."

He had guessed truly, though the apartment in which they found themselves more closely resembled a business office. A roll-top desk, a swivel chair, filing cases and a solidly compact safe met their gaze; the rugs, the upholstered furniture and tall bookcases which completed the appointments formed merely an incongruous background.

"Unless you're up in safe-blowing, which I doubt, I don't see as this room is going to tell us anything!" Dennis remarked. "Them keys that you stuffed your pockets with will do no good."

"Won't they?" McCarty chuckled grimly and strode toward the nearest filing case. "Hold your light steady, Denny; fireproof this thing may be, but all the sections of it open with the one lock and I could pick it with a buttonhook!"

The lock confirmed his opinion by yielding to the third key tried, and the various sections filled with an orderly arrangement of ledgers and documents were at their disposal.

"Look at the fine, neat writing of him." Dennis was rummaging in the topmost one. "What's this? 'Tis a lot of typed stuff with his own notes on the margin and headed: 'Report. Chris Porter, 1913-1920.' He's wrote under it: 'Reasonable doubt. Pardon essential'; then, 'Pardon granted, help needed.'"

"Give it to me!" McCarty demanded. "Are there any more like it? These ledgers have nothing in them but notes on charity cases."

"Here's another; something about a reformatory, and in his own writing: 'Weak not vicious. Useful if right influence.' It's headed: 'Danny Sayre, 17.'—This one is about that Jennie Malone—"

"Let me have them all!" McCarty interrupted. "Don't you see what they are? The criminal records of all the hired help! Take the next section, after."

A pause broken only by the rustling of papers ensued and then Dennis exclaimed in an awestruck whisper:

"Mac! Here's a lot of notes about ways of killing, all mixed up with religion, and—and among 'em's poison gas! Flourine, hydrogen and H_2F_2—!"

"Grab it!" McCarty hastily thrust the documents he had been examining into his pockets and closed the filing case. "Grab all the notes and come along; we'll need look no further in this house!"

Yet on the way to the door he paused and ran the pin-point of light along the rows of books in their towering cases. They appeared to be volumes of reference on widely diversified subjects, from hygiene and sanitation to law and religion; all were arranged in meticulous order, save on a lower shelf where the huge tomes of an encyclopædia had been stacked helter-skelter. One volume, that labeled: "Bronze—Cephalaspis," protruded from the row as though too hastily replaced and McCarty stooped on a sudden impulse and drew it out. The morocco covers fell apart and the book opened midway, where a thin, silvery, leaf-shaped object had been inserted as a mark.

At a muttered injunction Dennis held his light trained

upon it and McCarty's eyes traveled down the page then stopped and for a long minute there was no sound except their mingled breaths. Then the latter whispered:

"Listen, Denny; here's a queer one!—'It is used in the form of an emulsion by the natives of Africa, as an ordeal when persons are suspected of witchcraft. It is believed that if the suspect vomits it he is innocent; if it is retained and death occurs, he is guilty.'"

"A mighty sensible arrangement, considering!" Dennis commented. "If he's guilty, and I'd not put witchcraft past them heathen, they're saved the bother and expense of an execution! . . . But what in the name of common sense has it got to do with what's been going on here in the Mall?"

"Nothing." McCarty tore out the page, wrapped it about the leaf-like bookmark and pocketed it. "Nothing whatever, except that the stuff they make the suspects take is Calabar bean!"

He replaced the mutilated volume and they stole from the room, making their way down the stairs and back to the open window, through which they had entered. The silence was unbroken and when they had crawled through the aperture and out into the wind-swept court McCarty leaned against the wall balancing himself precariously on one foot as he drew on a shoe, while Dennis softly closed the window.

"We'll not be breaking into Orbit's?" the latter asked, as he followed his companion's example. "Them notes about poison gas, the marked page telling of Calabar bean, and the life history of the crooks he surrounds himself with—if Benjamin Parsons isn't the man we're looking for I'll eat my hat!"

"Then maybe you'd better be working up an appetite

against the future!" suggested McCarty dryly. "There's no more proof against him than there was against that Otto Lindholm and if the lights are out over at Orbit's I'm going to take a chance!"

The miniature palace across the way was in total darkness, but its marble front gleamed whitely in the faint glimmer of starlight before a wind-driven cloud obscured them again. Once more escaping the vigilance of the night watchman they crossed the street and passed down the opening next to the Goddard house where the glow from all the upper windows bore mute testimony once more to the sustained anxiety and heartbreaking suspense within.

McCarty halted his companion before the little side door.

"I'll wait here while you go around back and cut any wires you find," he directed. "The bulge of the conservatory hides me from the street and 'tis not likely any of the Goddard household will be looking out their windows. What with the murder and then company and all, Ching Lee may have forgot to fasten this door proper on the inside, and we can force it easier than the iron grill outside the rear windows. Don't be all night, Denny!"

Dennis glanced rather dubiously up at the next house, then out to the sidewalk, but he hurried away without a word and McCarty took out his keys and waited.

The strangely coincidental facts he had unearthed in Benjamin Parsons' study gave him much food for reflection, but long experience made him more wary of jumping to conclusions than his optimistic colleague. Parsons was known as an eminent and practical philanthropist; what if he'd taken those ex-convicts into his

home to reform them at first hand? It would be natural enough for him to keep reports on their past records. Calabar bean had been prominently mentioned in the papers in connection with the murder of his neighbor's valet; mightn't he have been interested sufficiently to look it up as a rarity? The notes on poison gas "mixed up with religion" were more difficult to explain, but then only Dennis had seen them yet and—where the devil was Denny, anyway?

McCarty craned his neck to stare into the darkness toward the rear but no deeper shadow moved and no sound came to him but the moaning swish of the wind. Denny had maybe found a burglar alarm that it wasn't so easy to put out of business!

Hollis pounded heavily past on the sidewalk, then returned and went on again and still there was no sign of his erstwhile companion. All at once the bolts of the door against which he leaned were drawn back and McCarty had barely time to spring aside and flatten himself in the corner of the out-curving glass conservatory wall when the door itself swung inward.

He held his breath but no one appeared. At last a low hiss assailed his ears.

"'Tis you!" Mingled relief and exasperation lent emphasis to his whispered ejaculation. "For what did you play such a damn fool trick? I near landed on the flat of my back—"

"Forget it!" Denny interrupted with unaccustomed tone. "Come on in before the watchman passes again! You'd never have got past these bolts only I found a way in through the little pantry ventilator; you couldn't have squeezed through it in a year!—Now, which way? Is it up to the floor where the Frenchmen and them two

heathen sleep that we'll be going? Nobody's stirring."

He had closed the door and noiselessly shot the bolt. McCarty responded:

"I want to make sure; Orbit said he wasn't a good sleeper, you'll remember, and if he could rest easy in his bed this night, with that poor girl murdered under his roof not so many hours past, he's not the man I took him for! We'll go up the back stairs and then sneak along the hall to his door. Thanks be, we know the lay of this house!"

They crept silently through the card-room and past the pantries to the back stairs, where they stopped and removed their shoes again before venturing upward. No faintest ray of light shone from under any door on the floor above, but from behind one on the left deep and regular stertorous sounds denoted that one at least of the household, doubtless the distinguished arrival of the previous evening, slumbered, unhaunted by morbid visions.

Before the door of Orbit's own bedroom they halted but no sound came from within and at length McCarty motioned to his companion and tiptoed into the sitting-room adjoining.

"You've been in that bedroom before." His lips barely formed the words close to Dennis' ear. "You'll know how the furniture's placed, so as not to fall over it. Go in and see is he asleep; I've our story all fixed if he should jump you."

"I've not!" Dennis retorted in palpable reluctance. "Moreover there's a queer, sweetish smell on the air; don't you get it? If he or anything else in there jumps me I hope you'll get busy first and explain afterwards!"

He left McCarty's side and the latter heard his feet pad softly off toward the connecting door between the

rooms. A pause ensued, then came the footsteps again but fainter now. After a moment a low light flashed. It wavered, steadied, went out suddenly and a dull thud came to McCarty's ears as the electric torch itself struck the thick pile of the rug. He started forward as Dennis' low, shaking voice was borne upon the silence.

"For the love of the saints, come here, Mac! Somebody's been before us!"

CHAPTER XVI

A QUESTION ANSWERED

FOR an instant McCarty's stout legs wabbled beneath him, then he drew himself together and pressing the button of his own flashlight he strode over the sill.

A strange scene presented itself to his staring eyes. Dennis was clinging weakly to an upright post at the foot of the heavily carved bed upon which Orbit was lying. His firmly molded chin was relaxed and the sunken, closed eyes were mere blotches of shadow in the grayish pallor of his face. The pajama jacket was open at his throat and his arms were flung above his head as though helplessness had come upon him in the effort to protect himself from an attack. As he noted these things McCarty became aware of the pungent, sweetish odor that assailed his own nostrils.

"Chloroform!" he gasped, pointing to a small bottle which stood upon the bedstand. "Isn't that a towel on the pillow beside his head? Throw it into the corner, Denny, and then get back into the other room, quick!"

Galvanized into life Dennis obeyed, retrieving his flashlight as he went. McCarty waited only long enough to open the two windows wide before rejoining him.

"Aren't we going to raise an alarm?" Dennis demanded excitedly, but McCarty lowered his own voice to a whisper once more.

"We are not, to get ourselves accused! We're going to beat it out the way we came as fast as the Lord'll let us. Don't open your mouth again till we get beyond the gates! Sure, the devil himself is let loose!"

Down the stairs they went, through the pantries and lower front hall to the card-room. The distance seemed interminable and every footstep resounded maddeningly in their nerve-shaken ears, but they did not pause until they reached the little side door and Dennis had shot the bolts back.

"Wait till we put on our shoes again," McCarty admonished. "There's no room to do it out in that alley and we're safe enough now, but hurry!"

Shod once more, they stole out, closing the door noiselessly behind them. The watchman had passed on in the direction of the east gate and they sped to the opposite one, passing through it just before he turned.

All desire for speech seemed to have left Dennis and they walked northward for several blocks before McCarty broke the silence.

"I suppose you think 'twas queer we didn't take that heaven-sent opportunity to search the house without Orbit, at least, to interrupt us, Denny, but there was no telling how long he'd been under that chloroform nor when he'd come out of it, and we could not say we'd scared away whoever did it to him or we would not have sneaked in ourselves."

"How do you know he wasn't dead?" Dennis' tone held a volume of reproach.

"I saw the chest of him rise and fall regular with his breathing, and a whiff like that could not put him out for the count!" McCarty declared impatiently. "Didn't I open the windows on him myself, and tell you to take

away the towel that must have slipped down from off his face?"

"'Twas still damp with that stuff!" Dennis muttered with a shudder.

"And chloroform evaporates quicker than anything else I know!" exclaimed his companion. "That shows it must have been given to him the minute, almost, before we went upstairs! The sitting-room looked all right to me; did you happen to notice whether anything was upset or not where he was?"

"I did not!" Dennis averred. "I'd the shock of my life when my light flashed over his face! If he's found dead come morning I'll feel as if I'd murdered him myself and not a wink will I sleep nor a free breath will I draw till I know he's all right!"

But when McCarty's rooms were reached again and the desultory discussion was renewed it was Dennis himself in whom exhausted nature first was revealed and he sank deeply into healthy slumber. His host, however, sat hunched in his armchair till dawn, smoking innumerable cigars and staring through narrowed eyes into the turbid atmosphere of the familiar room as though he beheld strange and evil things.

Finally he stretched himself out wearily beside Dennis and dropped into an uneasy slumber, to be awakened by the sharp ringing of the telephone. When he turned from it, after receiving the frenzied message, it was to find his guest draped in his own shabby bathrobe, waiting with morbid expectancy for the news.

"Is Orbit dead—?"

"He is not! He's got the inspector fair wild with his tale of being drugged in the night and on top of it old

Benjamin Parsons reports a robbery! Both the watchmen are fired temporarily and lads from headquarters put in their place," McCarty retorted succinctly. "It's a nice, peaceful day you'll be having of it at the fire house while I face the music!"

Dennis gulped with relief.

"Was anything took from Orbit's house, did the inspector say?"

"He'd no time, but I'm thinking he'll be on his way here as soon as he can pacify the two latest victims of outrage there in the Mall. Moreover, if you're going to stop for Brian to shave you after breakfast, it will be a miracle that you're not late for duty!"

Dennis disappeared promptly into the bathroom and McCarty gathered up the documents and the page torn from the encyclopædia purloined from the Parsons house, and stowed them carefully away before making his own hasty toilet. They ate a sketchy breakfast together at the accustomed restaurant and then separated, McCarty returning to his rooms with a sheaf of newspapers to await the coming of his superior.

From the front page of the first paper the pictured face of Horace Goddard stared out at him, big-eyed and wistfully alert, and the caption beneath announced that Mr. Eustace Goddard offered twenty-five thousand dollars' reward for information which would lead to the recovery of his son. A second article, brief but placed in significant juxtaposition to it, declared that no further progress had been made in the investigation into the death of the valet, Alfred Hughes, who had succumbed to the effects of the little-known poison physostigmine soon after leaving the residence of his employer Mr. Henry Orbit

in the New Queen's Mall six days before, but the authorities expected to make an important arrest in connection with it in the immediate future.

Inspector Druet's impatient ring brought McCarty quickly to his feet and as the former sprang up the stairs he flung open the living-room door.

"Mac, what the devil have you been doing?"

"Me, inspector?" McCarty's face was a study, but he had misunderstood.

"Yes! Why weren't you on the job? They've raised hell in the Mall last night while I was chasing up some false clues about the Goddard case and I haven't laid eyes on you since the medical examiner's assistant arrived at Orbit's yesterday!"

"I've been getting a bit of sleep, this morning," McCarty replied evasively. "Did you see Parsons? You told me he'd been robbed,—did he say what was stole from him?"

"No. That's the queer part of it. When he phoned to headquarters he was anxious to talk but as soon as I got to his house he began to hedge. A whole pane had been removed from one of the rear windows, and the telephone and Kip alarm system wires were cut, but he couldn't show me that anything in his study had been disturbed, and although he insisted that some documents had been stolen from his filing case he would tell me nothing about them except that some were notes for a book he was writing and the rest of a highly personal nature."

"If 'twas nothing of money value I'd not be bothering about it," McCarty suggested hurriedly. "He got off light, considering what's happened at other houses on that block.—Look at Orbit! Wasn't he drugged be-

sides, to say nothing of the murder committed there?"

"Yes, but nothing was stolen from him. He tells me he took a bromide to try to sleep, for the shock of the girl's death in the afternoon had about made him go to pieces. He was just dozing off when he thought he heard something in the room. He couldn't be sure and before he could make a move a towel was clapped over his face; the next thing he knew he woke up mighty sick. He would have thought the whole thing was a nightmare, only there was the towel saturated with chloroform in a corner of the room, the bottle itself on a stand beside his bed and the windows open wider than he had left them. The rest of the household, including Sir Philip Devereux and his valet, Harry Blake, weren't even disturbed. There's no sign of how the burglar got in, except that the side door opening from the card-room was found unbolted this morning, though Ching Lee swears he fastened it as usual last night, and the telephone wires outside the house were cut, just as Parsons' were."

"Well, if Orbit has recovered and nothing was taken there's been small harm done there, either," McCarty commented, adding: "Is Sir Philip going to stay on at Orbit's?"

"He sails Saturday. I should think he'd find Orbit's kind of hospitality a little strenuous, although he seems to be a fine old sport!—Mac, what are we to do? I'm about at the end of my rope, and though the happenings last night don't mean actual tragedy they show how little the scoundrels back of these crimes are afraid of being found out!"

In the clear morning light the inspector's face seemed to have aged years and McCarty's heart smote him.

"Oh, I don't know, sir," he said. "If just papers that

were useful to no one but himself were taken from Parsons and nothing at all from Orbit maybe some one just pulled off those two stunts to throw you off the track of the two murders and the kid's disappearance.—Have you heard from Martin?"

"He's back and Blaisdell the artist came with him. Blaisdell's at Goddard's now, offering whatever help he can give, but he hasn't seen Horace since the boy came to his studio to bid him good-by; I talked to him and I'd swear he's on the level. It's the most infernal mystery—!"

"Has the autopsy been performed yet on that girl Lucette?" McCarty's tones had lowered.

"Just an hour ago. Mac, it's got the whole medical bureau going! The examiner agrees with Dr. Allonby, but he can't go any further! The kind of gas that was used is a new one on them, deadlier than any sort the war produced and they've sent to Washington to find out if anything is known of it there.—Thanks." Inspector Druet accepted the cigar which the other proffered and after it was alight he added: "Flourine gas is one of its component parts—"

"Flourine!" McCarty paused, with the match halfway to his own cigar.

"Yes, but there are other properties with it; flourine burns, you know, but there was no trace of that on the girl's face, although her lungs were seared. How it was ever forced on her is beyond me, and the Chief is raging like a caged bear!" He shook his head dejectedly. "If we don't show results mighty soon I'm due for a transfer and that means the beginning of the end; but I don't feel that so keenly as I do my sense of failure! I had a chance for quick action when that valet was poi-

soned, but now that little boy and the fine young French girl—God, it seems as though I had been criminally negligent!"

"Not a bit of it, inspector!" McCarty exclaimed earnestly. "It's just like I was saying to Denny; we're up against the worst case and the cleverest murdering devil in the history of the department and we'll not be laying him by the heels by working along behind him. It's from what he's going to pull in the future that we'll get him, and then only through out-guessing him. Who'll be the next? That's the question we've got to answer."

When, after threshing the situation over thoroughly once more, the inspector finally took his departure, McCarty put in a long hour studying the papers taken from Parsons' filing case. The collection of reports, evidently transcriptions from court and police records, besides the names of Jennie Malone, Chris Porter and the boy Danny Sayre, comprised those of Bert Ferris, Hannah Cray and Bessie Dillon. Ferris had been convicted of insurance fraud, but Parsons had annotated the report: "Great provocation through need for dependents." Hannah Cray was a shoplifter and Bessie Dillon a confidence worker and after the names of both women had been written: "Reform assured."

The manuscript proved to be a compilation of scattered and disconnected notes, relative to various methods employed in modern warfare, together with lengthy diatribes against the sin of organized killing. McCarty had little patience to peruse it. The references to flourine gas gave merely the formula and effect.

Without glancing again at the article on Calabar bean, McCarty put the torn page away with the other papers but slipped the odd, silvery bookmark in his pocket. A

violent rainstorm was raging and taking a stout umbrella he clapped on his hat, locked the door behind him and descended to the street. Here he was pounced upon by a young man with a shock of very red hair, who had been lying in wait for him in Monsieur Girard's shop doorway.

"Hey, Mac, got you at last! What brought Inspector Druet to you so early this morning? Anything new turned up in that merry little three-ring circus of crime that is giving a continuous performance under your noses over at the New Queen's Mall?"

The taunt was a shrewdly calculated one, but McCarty grinned affably.

"I see your *Bulletin* this morning has only the story of the girl's death yesterday afternoon, Jimmie; that's old stuff, now."

Jimmie Ballard opened his eyes and ducked confidentially under the shelter of McCarty's umbrella.

"For the love of Pete, has there been more doing?" he gasped. "Come across, Mac! You know I'm always ready to do you a good turn! What's up now?"

"We-ell," McCarty assumed an air of troubled indecision. "Of course there's no one between those gates would breathe a word of it to you newspaper guys and if I was to tell you about the two robberies it might get back to me. Not being regularly on the Force any more I'd not want the inspector to think—"

"Two robberies!" Jimmie's eyes shone. "Pretty! Mac, let me get the story through to the shop and we'll have an 'extra' out in half an hour! I'll keep you out of it, I swear—!"

"All right, then, if you'll do something for me after," McCarty suddenly reached into his pocket and drew out

Parsons' bookmark. "Find out what the devil is this made of and 'phone me at my rooms to-night; mind you don't mention it in your story or never another tip will you get from me!—Now, here's what happened. . . ."

He repeated briefly the inspector's version of the incidents of the previous night and then, well satisfied, he continued on his way. It led him on a long and diversified path through that day's storm; to headquarters, the Public Library, the city's mortuary and the laboratories of the university. For the first time since the inception of the strangely complex case he steered clear of the Mall and it was not until darkness had fallen that he returned to his rooms, rain-soaked and weary.

Inside the living-room he felt mechanically for the light switch in the wall, but the button clicked futilely. At the same moment he lifted his nose in the air and sniffed sharply.

Some one had been in his rooms again! His lights had been tampered with, for they were on the same current as the house next door and a ray from there was even now streaking faintly across the air-shaft past his bedroom window. Moreover there'd been nothing wrong with his switch the night before! Was somebody waiting for him?

Aware that the feeble gas jet in the hall below was yet strong enough to silhouette him vaguely in its glimmering half-light, he pulled the door shut behind him and whipped out his revolver.

"Is anybody here?" His bull-throated demand cut the silence. "Come on, you white-livered son-of-a-gun, and I'll give you the fight of your life!"

He waited, his ears strained to catch the slightest sound, but none came; no stir of a foot, no whisper of

breathing broke the utter stillness in which the echo of his voice had died away and after a minute that seemed ages long doubt changed to certainty.

Somebody had been there and gone; but had he gone far? What had been done in his rooms that he was not meant to see? What had the intruder left behind him for McCarty to blunder into in the darkness? Had a trap been set for him under his own roof?

McCarty pressed his lips grimly together, his square jaw outthrust. Keeping his revolver still cocked and ready in his right hand he reached behind him with the other and propped his umbrella against the wall. Then half-stooping he advanced a step straight before him in the direction of the fireplace. With infinite caution and the delicacy of one in a maze of live wires his left hand groped about in the pitch blackness surrounding him, but it encountered only empty air. He took another step forward, then another. . . .

At last! At the height of about his middle from the floor his fingers touched a fine cord drawn straight across his path, so taut that it vibrated like a harp-string beneath a contact as light as a mere breath! Running his fingers along it with the light touch of a drifting feather he moved to the left until the cord made a sharp turn around the corner of his heavy desk. Once more he started forward. Now he was facing again toward the fireplace but the left side of it, and his guiding line was rising! It must be at the height of the mantel now, he must almost have reached the shelf itself!

Moving even more cautiously, inch by inch, his fingers traveling with still greater delicacy, he followed the cord to the corner of the mantel. There his hand came in contact with what appeared to be a pulley, rigged in-

geniously over the clamp of a portable lamp bracket which had never been fastened there before.

If the cord were broken something on the other end of that pulley running under the mantel would drop; and then what would happen? Would the house be blown to bits in the explosion of some infernal machine, or something fall on him from above? It had obviously been intended that he should break that string; but why had it been taken for granted that finding his lights out of commission he would walk straight forward from the doorway, instead of perhaps around the wall—?

His matches, of course! He wouldn't be supposed to stop and fumble in his clothes for any he might be carrying when a whole box of them were where he always kept them there on the mantel before him! 'Twas from the mantel itself, then, or just under it, that trouble could be looked for, if the weight on the other end of that pulley dropped, and that trouble would occur somewhere in a line with the doorway!

Shifting his revolver to his left hand McCarty felt with the right for the weight dangling from the end of the pulley. His compressed lips widened at the corners in a grim smile as he followed it up again and along under the edge of the mantel until his fingers met the cold ring of a revolver muzzle.

So that was the answer! When the weight dropped, that cord, as fine and strong as fishline, which he could feel wound around the trigger, would snap back and from that muzzle would streak forth a death message, certain and sure!

But not while McCarty knew it! Dropping his own revolver into his pocket he swiftly and skilfully disengaged the cord from about the trigger of the other and

drew it from the cradle of wire which had been strung over two nails driven into the underside of the mantel-shelf. Placing it upon the mantel within easy reach he found it but the work of a moment to jerk down the lamp bracket and its improvised pulley, break and haul in the cord and throw the whole mechanical device into the empty fireplace.

Then another thought came to him. Suppose the party who had planned that little surprise for him were waiting about in the immediate vicinity, near enough to have seen him come in, close enough at hand to hear the anticipated report? Wouldn't he be likely to come then to see the result for himself? Wouldn't that be his next logical move?

His next move! Since he entered the room McCarty had been too busy to wonder why this reception had been arranged for him, but now a light broke over his mind and he all but chuckled aloud. He'd been asking himself and Denny a question for the last twenty-four hours and now by the Lord it was answered for him!

But why should his enemy be disappointed? Why shouldn't he hear that shot after all, and in coming to investigate, reveal his own identity? There was nothing above the ceiling but the loft and nothing above that again but the roof and the clouds that were pouring down rain that minute! With a sudden impulse McCarty seized the revolver from the mantel, aimed it straight up into the air and fired, then jumped nimbly aside, crouching behind the great armchair.

The echo of the shot had scarcely died away when there came a terrific banging upon the entrance door below and this time a hoarse chuckle did force its way from McCarty's throat.

That was the game, was it?—To pretend he was just passing and raise all the hell he could getting in, so as to attract attention to the fact that he came after the shot was fired? Let him bang away and break the door down! The one who'd come up those stairs would be the one who had rigged up that murder machine!

The banging gave place to a moment of silence and then came a mighty crash, followed by another and another, till at length the door fell inward with a snap of the lock and a rending jar, and some one sobbing harshly, chokingly, came bounding and scrambling up the stairs, preceded by a wildly darting flashlight which played under the living-room door. Then that door also was flung wide, the light swept about and a broken voice in the throes of mental agony howled dolorously:

"Mac! For the love of God, what's happened you!"

McCarty came out sheepishly from behind the chair.

"I've been handling revolvers since first I went on the cops, Denny, with never a mischance, but when the lights went out on me just now all of a sudden whilst I was cleaning this I'll be damned if it didn't go off in my hand!"

CHAPTER XVII

FOREWARNED

DENNIS' lacerated emotions were finally soothed and after an old oil lamp was resurrected from the store-closet and lighted he seated himself for a pipe and a chat, but the shock had disorganized him beyond concentration on the case and he departed early for the fire house.

McCarty had carefully kept his bulk between his visitor and the sight of what lay in the fireplace and the moment the latter went away he removed the death-dealing paraphernalia and locked it in his bedroom closet beneath a pile of old boots, together with the revolver. This had proved on examination to be a replica of his own old service one. How could his would-be assassin have come into possession of a "police positive," a .38 manufactured for the department alone?

While he was pondering this the telephone rang and Jimmie Ballard's voice came to him over the wire.

"Say, Mac, do you know what that was you handed me to-day? A silver leaf!"

"It looked kind of like a leaf and there was a silvery tinge to it Jimmie, but I thought it was made of flat plush!" McCarty replied. "I'm no wiser than I was before. What is it?"

"A leaf from an African silver-tree, of a species that grows most plentifully on Table Mountain, just back of

Cape Town; no telling how old it is, for they last forever if they're not handled too much. Where did you get it and what has it to do with that little affair you and I were talking about this morning?"

"Not a thing in the world!" McCarty avowed hastily. "'Tis just something I picked up. I'll be thankful if you'll put it in an envelope and mail it to me special delivery, though."

"All right!" Jimmie laughed. "Of course it isn't important when you've got to have it by 'special,' and you were willing to trade the best beat of the year for information about it, but give me the dope on it one jump ahead of the other boys and I won't ask any more. Did you see our extra?"

McCarty cut short the youthful Jimmie's enthusiasm. He had to stand with his back squarely to the door to talk into the 'phone and he didn't know when his mysterious visitor might return. That shot had miraculously not aroused the neighborhood but undoubtedly that was because of the noise of wind and rain. Would the author of his little surprise have sufficient strength of mind to remain away and wait to see if the morning papers held any account of the possible tragedy?

He would, if he was one and the same with the human fiend who had brought all those horrors to pass in the Mall, and of that McCarty was morally convinced. He had told Dennis and the inspector, too, that it would be only by out-guessing him and anticipating who his next victim was scheduled to be that they could hope to solve the mystery. Now he grinned to himself; little had he thought then who was elected!

But the event of the evening made one fact manifest; the man was afraid! He was beginning to show weak-

ness, his armor was cracking, his nerve was giving way! The desperate chance he had taken of being discovered at his work, the very elaborateness of the scheme itself, told of the effort made in a frenzy of guilty apprehension to wipe out one of those who represented the law.

Yet the brain which had conceived and carried to a successful conclusion two such strange crimes as the murders, to say nothing of the making away with the child Horace, would be more than a match for the present situation. Having learned of his first failure he would be doubly on the alert and wary. McCarty had drawn his fire and in all probability there would be a cessation of crimes in the Mall while he gave his attention to those who threatened to thwart his hideous activities.

The storm raged even more fiercely, as the hour grew late, and for more reasons than one McCarty was reluctant to venture forth for his forgotten dinner. He unearthed a battered percolator, tinned meat and crackers and made a light meal, retiring to bed at last with his revolver beneath the pillow.

When he awakened a dark day had broken and he lay for a time listening to the wind roaring down the chimney and the rain driving in sheets against the windows while he formed an immediate plan. He must work alone, for Denny would be on duty again for twenty-four hours straight, and he welcomed the fact. If there were to be any further attempts made upon him, the faithful Denny must not share the danger; it would be just Denny's luck to walk into a trap not meant for him!

As for himself, McCarty meant to give his adversary every opportunity to try again. He shaved and dressed and as he did so his blood raced as in the old days, with

joy of the contest, yet now for the first time in his career he was hunted, not hunter; he had, in a twinkling, changed places with the arch-murderer and child-stealer and the thought gave added zest to the problem of the future. He was leaving for his accustomed restaurant when the telephone shrilled and he paused before taking down the receiver.

His visitor of the night before could already have learned from the papers that his attempt had failed, but what if he were ringing up now to be sure that the event had not actually occurred and remained as yet undiscovered? Would he betray himself by surprise at the sound of his intended victim's voice?

McCarty unhooked the receiver, waited a moment, and then called in a sudden, hearty tone:

"Hello!"

"Am I addressing ex-Roundsman McCarty?" The voice which came to him was elderly and formal, and, as McCarty replied in the affirmative, he was certain he had never heard it before.

"Inspector Druet suggested that I telephone and ask you for an interview on a strictly private matter, Mr. McCarty. This is Benjamin Parsons speaking, of Number Seven, New Queen's Mall." His tone betrayed not the slightest emotion. "Can you tell me when you will be at liberty to come to me?"

"In one hour, Mr. Parsons," McCarty responded promptly. "'Tis about what happened night before last?"

"Yes." There was a note of finality in the quick, firm monosyllable. "In an hour, Mr. McCarty."

The click of a distant receiver came to his ears and McCarty went out with a puzzled frown. Had the in-

spector an inkling as to the identity of Parsons' "burglar" and was he passing the buck?

Thrust half under his door he found an envelope with a special delivery stamp; Jimmie Ballard had kept his word and returned the silver leaf. McCarty slipped it into his pocket and went out into the downpour, but his thoughts were almost immediately diverted from it by the Italian news-vendor on the corner, an acquaintance of many years' standing.

"You on da job again!" White teeth gleamed in the swarthy countenance. "Diss-a pape' say you gonna fin' da guy w'at murd' da French-a girl!"

It was the *Bulletin* and Jimmie Ballard's idea of a joke was to announce the rumor that former Roundsman Timothy McCarty, whose achievements in the department had been unique and notable, had been reattached to the detective bureau for special investigation in connection with the crime wave in the New Queen's Mall and important developments might be expected shortly.

McCarty passed it by with a grunt. His eye was caught by a brief paragraph, lower on the page, and he stood still, unheeding the rain which streamed down his neck from his tilted umbrella. It was a bald statement that George Radley, the poisoner who escaped from Sing Sing a month before had been found wandering in a hopelessly demented condition on the upper East Side and would undoubtedly be committed to Matteawan. The clothing he wore was being traced, in an effort to locate the possible accomplices to his escape.

With a nod to the news-vendor McCarty hurried on at last, and while he awaited his order at the little restaurant he gave himself up to reflection. Was that why Parsons had sent for him? Had he learned that the

escaped prisoner received aid from beneath his roof?

He ate hastily and then made all speed to the New Queen's Mall, where just within the gate he ran into Inspector Druet.

"You've heard from Parsons?" the latter asked.

McCarty nodded.

"He said you told him to send for me. Whatever for, sir?" His tone was blandly innocent. "What can I tell the old gentleman about his lost papers?"

"It's what he'll tell you, if you can get it out of him; I can't," confessed his superior. "He's got something up his sleeve, all right, and if he weren't such a well-known character I'd think he guessed more about that robbery than he was willing to say! The other one who was holding out on us came across last night but it isn't going to help any except to remove one more possibility."

"Who was it?" demanded McCarty.

"Eustace Goddard. The only thing that has kept him and his wife both going during these three days since the boy disappeared was their own private suspicion that he had been kidnapped for ransom and would be held safely until the exchange could be made, but now that hope has gone. The man they thought had taken Horace away was a former business associate of Goddard's, down and out now. He applied to Goddard for financial help, it seems, at a time when it would have saved him, and when it was refused he threatened to make Goddard pay if he stripped him of the most precious thing he had. Goddard has been quietly looking for him since the trouble came and expecting him hourly to make a demand for a large sum; that was why he was willing to offer such a huge reward. Last evening, however, he ran him to earth and found out that the poor devil had been ill

in a sanitarium for months and didn't know anything about Horace. Mrs. Goddard is almost insane—Allonby is attending her—and Goddard himself is nearly as bad but I can only put him off with the same old promises and bunk!—Look over there now; that's the boy's police dog Max. He's grieving himself to death, they tell me. Mac, if we don't do something soon—!"

"We'll be sitting tight and let the other fellow show his hand, the guy that's been pulling all these murders and such." They had passed down the block together toward the Parsons house and as he spoke McCarty glanced across the street to the court beside the Goddards'. The slim, smooth-coated police dog was pacing restlessly up and down with the slinking, mechanical movement of a beast in captivity, his swaying head hung low and tail drooping.

The inspector followed his companion's gaze.

"Trafford says he tried to coax Max to go for a walk but the dog won't go further than that from the house; they're one-man creatures anyway, that breed, and the boy was his god.—If you can get anything that looks like straight dope out of the old gentleman 'phone me at the medical examiner's office."

He went on and McCarty ascended the steps of the Parsons residence and rang the bell. His summons was replied to after some little delay by a youth who carried himself smartly if awkwardly in his page's uniform. The bright if somewhat weak face seemed abnormally pale, however, and his sharp eyes shifted in a scared fashion.

"Name's McCarty," the newcomer announced briefly. "Mr. Parsons expects me."

"Yes, sir!" The youth's tone was almost servile. "You can go right back to his study, sir. I'll show you!"

He led the way to the room which McCarty had already visited surreptitiously two nights before, and knocked on the door.

"Come in." The same dignified, elderly voice which had sounded over the telephone answered the rapping and a man rose slowly from behind the desk as they entered. He was tall and powerfully built, with a keen, intellectual face softened by warm, gray eyes and a well-molded mouth, sensitive yet firm. His finely shaped head was covered with a shock of snow-white hair as long as a mane and his old-fashioned high stock and severely cut black coat made him resemble a figure from the past. He looked to McCarty's eyes as though he might have stepped out of one of the frames in his own portrait gallery, but there was no suggestion of a pose about him. Without sound or gesture he appeared to dominate the room and his caller felt almost abashed in his presence.

What would the old gentleman think if he knew the actual burglar stood before him? McCarty could feel his honest face grow hot, but he held his chin a trifle higher. After all, Parsons had known about flourine gas and powdered Calabar bean, he'd a bunch of crooks in his house and knew it, and when his notes had been taken he didn't feel like coming clean about them! He might have a bit of explaining to do himself!

"Lieutenant McCarty, sir." The elevation in rank was patent flattery and McCarty's eyes twinkled as Benjamin Parsons bowed.

"That will do, Danny.—Mr. McCarty," he added as the page boy withdrew, "I have asked you to come here because your inspector is occupied with matters of graver import to the little community in the Mall. From your question over the telephone this morning I gather you

have been informed of the occurrence here on Wednesday night?"

"Yes, Mr. Parsons," McCarty replied. "Your house was entered by way of the rear window, wasn't it, and some papers taken? As I heard it, the wires were cut outside and a pane of glass knocked out."

"An interior alarm system of my own was also very cleverly disconnected so that it would not register in my bedroom.—But won't you sit down?" A slender hand waved to a chair and McCarty obeyed. "All this is as unimportant as is the identity of the intruder, or as his identity would be if he had come merely for gain like the usual housebreaker; but this he was not. Articles of value were practically within reach of his hand—gold and silver plate, ivories and bronzes and ceramics which would have meant a fortune to the ordinary burglar, remained undisturbed, while the documents he searched for and found could be of no possible pecuniary benefit to him."

Mr. Parsons' eyes were fastened on McCarty in an earnest, steady gaze which the latter found somehow disconcerting. He cleared his throat nervously.

"The inspector told me 'twas notes for a book that was missing, and some other papers that was personal," he remarked.

"Personal to others than myself, I regret to say," Mr. Parsons shook his head. "That is why I did not go into particulars at first, but since I reported the matter to the authorities I have made another discovery which, taken in connection with the rest, leaves me no choice. The personal documents removed from this filing case over here related to the unfortunate past history of several people whom I count among my friends and it would

be unjust to give publicity to them now, much less to permit these records to remain in unworthy hands. The manuscript of my book is perhaps small loss to the world, but it is the result of years of profound thought and research. I may add that it was intended as a message, an appeal for universal peace and I had dwelt in detail upon the horrors of the last war, describing in full the methods employed by man to destroy his fellows. I am stating this because one of the weapons so described was flourine gas, and the formula was given. Flourine gas has been mentioned in the papers in connection with the sad death of the young nurse across the street, but I did not even think of the coincidence until I made a further discovery last night."

"What was it?" McCarty felt that the question was expected of him although he well knew what was coming. Was the old gentleman the grand character he appeared or as shrewd as they make them and playing safe? He could have blushed for his own suspicious mind, but Parsons called the crooks his "friends" and was trying to protect them. What the devil did it all mean?

"When your inspector first called upon me to make certain inquiries last week, at the time a manservant—from the same house as that in which the young girl passed away—also died, he told me of the poison believed to have been used: physostigmine."

"Calabar bean," McCarty nodded.

"Quite so. I had never heard of it, as it happened, and I looked it up in some books of reference I have; books in common use in every home of intelligent interests. I was called away before I had finished reading the article and marked the page. That page, Mr. McCarty, has been torn from my encyclopædia, and this

could only have been done on Wednesday evening."

The gentle yet dominating voice had continued in its level, perfectly controlled monotone and McCarty looked down at the floor but felt impelled to raise his eyes again. If only the old gentleman would look away for a minute!

"It seems like a queer sort of burglar that would tear a page out of a book he could find anywhere, and the fact that it was an article about Calabar bean, and the notes on flourine gas gone too—!" The words stuck in McCarty's throat but he forced himself to go on: "Why should he have took them just from here, when the damage was done with the both of them, and how did he know where to get them, anyway?"

"I have been asking myself those questions but I cannot answer them. However, I am convinced that those two coincidences are more than coincidences and it was my duty to report them."

"Yes, of course." McCarty shuffled one foot. "Mr. Parsons, what's become of your butler, Chris Porter?—Roberts, he called himself here."

He had launched the question with deliberate abruptness but the gray eyes did not waver.

"You knew of his identity? The record of his misfortune was one of those taken from my filing case."

"I recognized him and he made a certain confession to me the other day." McCarty returned the gaze with interest now and he saw Mr. Parsons start slightly, a faint flush rising in the smooth pallor of his cheeks.

"A confession? Christopher was a broken man, subjected to a persecution which would have been unfair even if he were guilty of the charge for which he had suffered imprisonment but I am convinced of his absolute innocence!" he asserted vigorously. "A grave miscar-

riage of justice had been committed; I could not restore to him the years which our penal system had taken from him but I was endeavoring to help him get on his mental and moral feet again, to win back his self-respect! Mr. McCarty, if Christopher made any supposed confession it must have been wrung from him by coercion! Innocent or guilty he has paid the penalty the State demanded!"

"Sure, for complicity in that poisoning case, if that's what you mean, but 'twas not that he confessed. Mr. Parsons, I'd like to ask you something." McCarty bent forward. "If a guy—I mean a man—was sent up and escaped and you thought he was innocent, would you think it your duty to hide him or turn him over to the law again?"

"I should deliver him to the authorities." The answer came without an instant's hesitation. "A man's personal opinion could not be allowed to weigh against the mandates of our laws or our whole social fabric would centuries ago have been undermined. The individual must be submerged in the collective body, if civilization is to endure!—But why do you ask?"

"You knew that Radley, the fellow sentenced with Porter, escaped a month ago and that he was caught last night?"

"I knew that he had escaped but not that he was recaptured!" Mr. Parsons spoke in oddly shocked accents. "The newspapers doubtless have an account of it, but I was too disturbed in mind this morning to glance at them.—Where was the unfortunate man found?"

"Not where he was last Sunday, Mr. Parsons!" McCarty retorted significantly. "He's supposed to be crazy now, so he'll go to the asylum instead of back up the river, but he wasn't crazy last Sunday, nor the week

and more before that, when he laid hid in the empty house next door here, fed from your table and cared for by some one in your house! That was Porter's confession, and I'm asking you where is he?"

"He has gone!" Parsons rested his elbow on his desk and shielded his eyes with his hand. "I never suspected this! Christopher laid the table for breakfast as usual this morning and arranged the mail and the newspapers; it must have been then that he saw the account of Radley's capture and ran away, panic-stricken for fear that he might fall into the hands of the law again! I have thought that he seemed more deeply troubled this week; if he had only come to me, and let me convince him of his higher duty! I have failed with him, failed!"

Deep distress throbbed with a note of pain in his tone but McCarty persisted dryly:

"That's as may be, sir. He left about the time the papers came? That'll be around eight o'clock? Was it before or after you 'phoned to me that you knew of it?"

Mr. Parsons' hand fell.

"Just before. I knew no reason for his departure and he left no word, but the condition of his room showed hurried flight. It was then that I decided to place myself unreservedly in your hands."

"Because of that missing dope about flourine gas and Calabar bean, and his own past history?" McCarty demanded. "Because he'd already been convicted of poison—!"

"Stop!" Mr. Parsons rose. "Christopher was innocent of that old charge and he was equally innocent of the crimes which have been committed this past week! He was mistaken in his sense of duty, but not a murderer!"

CHAPTER XVIII

CHECKMATE!

McCARTY left the Parsons house a few minutes later, his mind a chaos of conflicting impressions. With the sonorous, dignified tones still ringing upon his ear and the deeply concerned gaze yet seemingly bent upon him Benjamin Parsons appeared the epitome of rectitude and righteousness, but had he been as certain of Porter's innocence as he claimed, and was he as ignorant of where he had gone?

He crossed the street to Orbit's house and glanced again into the court between that and Goddard's. Max was still there, but he had lain down as though exhausted and his ribs, glistening with the rain, showed pitifully gaunt. Why didn't they take the poor fellow in? McCarty stopped and spoke coaxingly to him. The dog slowly rolled his lack-luster eyes upon him but made no other response.

For a long minute McCarty stood thoughtfully regarding the dog. When, at last, he continued on his way there was a curiously absent look upon his face.

Ching Lee admitted him and took him to the library where he had first been received. A small fire of some strange, peat-like fuel was burning on the hearth, sending out iridescent flames and a faint pervasive odor as of sandalwood, and before it Orbit was seated, with a stout, florid man in tweeds.

"Good-morning, McCarty. I rather thought that you or the inspector would look in on me this morning." Orbit turned to his guest. "Sir Philip, this is Deputy McCarty, the official who is working with Inspector Druet on the investigation into this hideous mystery."

Sir Philip Devereux nodded to the ex-roundsman cordially.

"Shocking affair, this! Shocking!" he commented. "Here for a little private chat with Mr. Orbit, what? I'll leave you—"

"No, don't go, Sir Philip!" Orbit demurred smilingly. "You know all the circumstances and McCarty and I haven't anything private to discuss. I hope he's brought me some news!—You heard about what happened to me the other night?"

"I did that," McCarty nodded. "What do you think 'twas done for, if nothing was taken?"

"Haven't the remotest idea.—Sit down here by the fire, man, you're soaked through!" Orbit added hospitably. "I'll have Ching Lee bring you a touch of something from my private stock—?"

"No, thank you, Mr. Orbit; I've a twinge of the gout now and then, though you mightn't think it," McCarty explained speciously. "I just dropped by to see if you'd thought of anything to add to what you told the inspector about the chloroforming?"

"Nothing. The whole thing happened so quickly and the impressions left on my mind were so vague, that I am afraid I can be of little use to you. One thing seems certain; the fellow didn't intend me to die from the effect of it, since he stopped to open the windows and throw away the cloth he had used to anæsthetize me!" Orbit shrugged. "The incident is absolutely inexplicable

except on the supposition that his only intention was to terrorize me, and that is really too absurd to consider."

"It was an outrage!" declared Sir Philip suddenly. "Damme, it passes belief! The chap must be a fiend—or mad! What object could he have in doing Hughes in? I say, there was a valet for you!—Then the girl, too! That poison gas theory seems to be rot to me, too utterly impossible with you there in the room, but the girl is dead, isn't she? There you are!"

He leaned back in his chair and puffed thoughtfully at his cigar. His host turned to McCarty with a faint hint of amusement in his eyes but it was quickly overshadowed by sadness again.

"The girl is dead, poor creature, and I cannot help feeling that the blame in some way rests at my door, for I invited her in. However her death was brought about the child escaped, though; we have that to be thankful for! We are none of us safe here on the Mall while the murderer is free to come and go in our houses at will, killing with impunity whenever the horrible impulse comes to him! I was reluctant to offer my hospitality to Sir Philip under these harrowing circumstances but he expressed himself as willing to abide by the consequences."

"Ripping experience!" the baronet nodded again. "Sorry I'm sailing to-morrow! Like nothing better than to stop and see it through!—Old chap over the way was robbed the same night, I hear; any clues left there, McCarty?"

There was no hint of sarcasm in his tone but McCarty flushed darkly, then he darted a quick glance at the questioner and a slow smile dawned. The Britisher was trying to get his goat!

"Yes, sir, the same as here," he replied. "Mr. Orbit, you've that chloroform bottle? The inspector says 'twas found on a stand beside your bed."

"Ching Lee has it, I believe; would you like to see it?" He rang the bell without waiting for a reply. "The cloth used was a towel from my own bathroom; it's evident that the fellow was familiar with the house and knew his way about; but how he got in that side door leading from the card-room, if Ching Lee really bolted it as usual the night before—? Oh, Ching Lee?"

The butler had appeared silently in the doorway and now Orbit addressed him in a rapid patter of Chinese. Ching Lee, as impassive and wooden of countenance now as before the tragedy, bowed and departed, and McCarty turned once more to Orbit.

"What time was it, as near as you can figure, that you were doped?"

"I should say, around two o'clock in the morning, perhaps a trifle before. Sir Philip and I sat up till after midnight playing chess, and when I retired I tried for more than an hour to sleep before I took a bromide. Things grew hazy after that and I don't know how long I dozed before I was conscious of some one in the room."

"You got no whiff of anything else before the chloroform hit you?" McCarty asked. "No smell of a pipe or cigar if the guy was a smoker, maybe?"

"I smoke so constantly myself that I would scarcely have noticed it even if there had been time and I were fully awake." Orbit raised his brows. "You smoke yourself, McCarty; could you have detected it?"

"Sure," McCarty stated the fact modestly. "I've not the nose Denny has, but 'tis easy to tell the smell of a

cigar from a pipe, even if it's only hanging about the clothes of a person; a rich, full-flavored cigar with a body to it leaves a scent that a man will travel with, whether he gets it himself or not."

"'Denny?'" Orbit repeated. "Oh, you mean your associate, Riordan? Yes, I remember he detected the odor of that small blaze here a week ago, when the monkey upset the cigar lighter in my room. Odd faculty, that, eh, Sir Philip?"

"Jolly, I fancy. I only wish I had it!" Sir Philip chuckled. "My man makes away with my cigars at a shockin' rate but I never can catch him at it. I say, no one's disturbed our board, have they?"

"Indeed, no," Orbit replied. "I gave strict orders and we can finish the set to-night.—Sir Philip held the amateur chess championship for Great Britain for five years."

He added this to McCarty and then turned as Ching Lee appeared again and spoke to him once more in his native tongue. The butler advanced and placed in McCarty's hands the bottle he had seen in Orbit's room two nights before.

"Has it been uncorked, do you know, since 'twas found beside you?" McCarty regarded the contents critically, removed the cork himself for a cautious whiff. Hurriedly replacing it, he handed the bottle back to Ching Lee and rose.

"I don't think so," Orbit whipped out his handkerchief and pressed it to his nose. "I am susceptible to *that* odor, at any rate, since Wednesday night!—Sorry not to be of any greater help to you. I shall depend on you and the inspector to keep me informed of any developments that may arise."

As McCarty trudged through the driving rain toward the east gate once more, he shook his head. Come night, it would be a week since Hughes had been done to death, and the end was not yet clear!

He made his way to the lunchroom on Third Avenue which he and Dennis had previously visited and in deference to the day ordered fried oysters. They were long in coming and he rested his elbows wearily on the table. Was he getting too old for the game, after all? In days gone by, when he was in harness, he'd have got to the truth long since. It had been a dog's life in more ways than one, yet he regretted more than ever that he had left it and grown rusty. . . .

All at once he straightened in his chair and sat staring at the cynical warning to "watch your hat and coat" on the wall before him as if the legend were wholly unfamiliar to him. The belated appearance of the waitress with the oysters roused him from his stupor and he rose hurriedly.

"Don't want 'em!" he muttered thickly. "Gimme the check; I got to beat it!"

Spilling a dime onto the table he took the slip of pasteboard, paid for his untouched food at the cashier's desk and went out as one in a dream. Once around the corner he seemed galvanized into life and set off briskly enough for the subway.

Twenty minutes later he presented himself at headquarters and after being closeted with the chief of the detective bureau for some little time he departed, armed with certain credentials for the main office of the telephone company.

There he spent a long and seemingly unproductive hour going over the calls from the Gotham exchange,

which included the New Queen's Mall, for the previous Tuesday.

Over Goddard's private wire had gone numerous messages before Trafford had called Blaisdell's studio; and in the late afternoon, when Horace's continued absence had caused alarm, there were fully a score of numbers registered before Goddard himself had summoned McCarty.

Orbit's telephone, too, had been busy, with the caterer, decorator, florist and a musical agency, in connection with the function of the afternoon. Three messages to the coal dealer and innumerable others followed, presumably sent by guests until the evening was far advanced.

Only four calls had been sent from the Bellamy house and they appeared to have been made by the lady herself, for they were to modiste, hairdresser, perfumer and a prominent department store.

Parsons' telephone had been connected with a foreign consulate, several charitable societies and a banking house, while the Sloane household had communicated with Doctor Allonby, a drug store, an agency for male nurses, the office number of a noted financier, and several residence numbers of equally well-known persons.

McCarty copied one or two numbers from each list and sallied forth to verify them, but, although the afternoon was long, twilight had not yet come when he returned to his rooms and entered cautiously.

They had not been intruded upon on this occasion, but he remained only long enough to secure the page torn from the encyclopædia and then slipped out again through the teeming rain to the fire house which domiciled engine company 023.

Dennis was matching nickels with Mike in the dormitory and reaping a rich harvest, but he hastily promised the loser his revenge later and slid down the pole to join McCarty.

"I've looked for you all afternoon!" he declared reproachfully, adding: "You've news! I can see it in the eye of you and I might have known something would start whilst I was out of it!"

"There's nothing new," McCarty responded quietly. "I've a queer notion in my head, but it's too sickening to spring even after all we know has happened, till I get hold of something to back it up. Parsons 'phoned for me this morning—the old gentleman himself—and told me the truth about what was missing since Wednesday night, which was no news. He said it was clever, the way you'd disconnected the inside alarm arrangement—"

"Me!" Dennis' leathery countenance blanched. "'Tis what I get for letting you lead me into breaking the law! Now I'll get thrown out of the department and pinched, and Molly will change the baby's name—!"

"Oh, Parsons did not know 'twas you, Denny, he just said it had been cleverly done," McCarty hastened to explain. "I sprung it on him about Porter and Radley and asked him what would he do if a fellow escaped that he thought was innocent and came to him and he spoke up quick that he'd turn him over to the authorities anyway; 'twould be his higher duty to our social fabric, whatever that is."

"It would, would it!" Dennis ejaculated in fine scorn. "The social fabric could go to blazes for all of me, but I'd stick to a pal, innocent or no! Howsomever, I've not the grand, cold-blooded principles of him!—You know the poor devil's been caught, crazier than a loon?"

McCarty nodded.

"Porter knows it, too; he's beaten it for fear he'll be sent up for hiding him." He finished his account of the morning's interview and then drew the torn page from his pocket. "There's more to this thing about the Calabar bean that I didn't read you, Denny, so I brought it around and maybe 'twill give us an idea.—Listen: 'Calabar Bean. Ordeal Nut. The seed of Physostigma ven-en-osum, a twining, half shrubby plant, native of Africa.' "

"What of it?" Dennis was frankly bored. "How is that going to help?"

"Wait a bit.—'The kernel is hard and white, and yields its virtue to alcohol and less perfectly to water.—' "

"I'll bet it does, or they'd never have got it down Hughes, if what we've heard of his habits is straight!" interrupted Dennis, his interest once more aroused. "There you've got it, Mac! Find the last one he took a drink with and you'll have the guy that croaked him!"

"That's not all," McCarty began again. " 'The beans are reddish, gray, or'—um—'Kidney-shaped, and about the size'—never mind that!—'Care should be taken to avoid spontaneous—' "

"Did you trail around here in all the rain to give me a botany lesson?" Dennis demanded indignantly. " 'Tis not from any book you'll be learning the truth! I was that upset last night, what with the revolver shot and all, that I never thought to ask you, but what did the old guy you know uptown say about that bu'sted blue balloon? Could he make out from the way it was rotting before our eyes the kind of gas there was in it?"

McCarty hesitated and then said slowly:

"Denny, you'll mind the other night after we had

examined it I put it in a cracker box while we went for a bite to eat and when we came home you saw me hunting around for something?"

"You were trying to whistle, too!" Dennis nodded. "That always means you think you're putting something over! What was it?"

"I was hunting for that cracker box. I knew the minute we came back into the room somebody'd been there, for there was the stale smell of a heavy cigar on the air, not as if he'd been smoking right then, but the scent of it was strong on him as he passed through the place; when I found the box missing I knew what he'd come for."

"Think of that now! Do you know what it means, Mac? The murderer knew you and not the medical examiner's assistant had taken it from the conservatory! I wonder if he followed us from then on? The sight of us parading through the streets with all them balloons would have told him we were on, if he wasn't blind!" Dennis grinned. "Leave the medical examiner find out what kind of gas was it; we know how 'twas give to her, though not what busted the balloon right in her face nor how the gas got in it! The notion come to me that 'twas not meant to kill Lucette, anyway."

"Not kill her!" exclaimed McCarty. "The first whiff of it must have knocked her cold!"

"But what if it was intended for the baby and not for her?" Dennis lowered his voice. "What if the murderer has a craze for killing children? I've heard tell of such things and so have you! Suppose Hughes was poisoned by mistake in the first place for Ching Lee, so that little Fu Moy wouldn't be protected. Then Horace was taken

away and maybe killed and the Bellamy baby was next on the list—!"

"Denny, you're running wild!" McCarty interrupted in his turn. "The murderer's brain has got a twist to it, but he's not as crazy as all that. Baby-killers are just stupid, low brutes without the shrewdness or knowledge to plan such crimes as we're up against now. We're fighting a mind, not a fist with a knife or a club in it!"

"So you've been saying!" Dennis retorted disgustedly. "That comes of those books you've been reading! Whilst you've been figuring out his ancestors and the blood that's in him to decide is he in the 'Born' or 'Habit' class, like that Diagnostic book of yours has it, he's been having an Old Home Week in the Mall, kidnapping and killing right and left! 'Twill be a week to-night—!"

McCarty beat a hasty retreat and took his solitary way to the restaurant, where he ate a hearty dinner to make up for the deferred lunch. Then he returned to the Mall, to prowl about like an unquiet if somewhat too material ghost. The rain had stopped at last and although the sky was still partially overcast the glimmer of a few stars gave promise of a clear dawn. Lights were brilliant in the Sloane, Parsons and Orbit residences, but low in Goddard's and Mrs. Bellamy's, where the lady had been in a hysterical state since the murder of her baby's nurse.

Yost had been relieved from his post at the mortuary to take the place of the night watchman, and McCarty walked up and down with him for more than an hour, discussing the strange chain of tragedies. All at once, as they passed the court next to the Goddard house, he heard a low, coaxing masculine voice and came upon

Trafford bending over something which lay in the shadows.

"Come on, old fellow!" the tutor was saying. "Come along in the house like a good boy! Horace isn't here, Max, it's no good waiting—!"

" 'Tis a strange acting dog and no mistake, Trafford," McCarty remarked.

The tutor looked up.

"He's grieving himself to death," he said. "He hasn't touched a morsel of food since Tuesday, though we've tempted him with everything, and he is so weak he can scarcely stand, but he waits about out here all the time for Horace to come home. I've got to get him in now if I have to carry him!"

At this juncture, however, Max rose languidly to his feet and began sniffing at McCarty's boots, whining softly.

" 'Tis like he was trying to talk!" the latter exclaimed.

"I wish he could, if he knows anything!" Trafford replied sadly. "If Horace isn't found soon his mother will lose her mind! McCarty, can't you people do anything? Even to know the—the worst would be better than this horrible uncertainty and suspense!"

"The lad's disappearance is not the half of what we're up against, Trafford," McCarty reminded him. "We're doing everything mortal to find him and soon, maybe to-morrow, we're going to take a big chance."

He watched while the tutor led the dog into the house and then shaking his head he proceeded to Orbit's and rang the bell. It was little Fu Moy, resplendent in his embroidered serving jacket, who opened the door and without announcing him, beckoned and preceded him to the library, where the last interview had taken place.

The room was in deep shadow save for the glow from the hearth and a single broad beam from a bridge lamp which played down upon a chess-board laid out on a small table. At opposite sides of it two silent, intent figures sat as immovably as graven images. If they were aware of McCarty's appearance they made no sign.

Were they hypnotized, or something? The two of them couldn't be asleep, sitting bolt upright like that! McCarty waited a good five minutes and then advanced slowly into the room but still they appeared oblivious.

Orbit was sitting forward, his eyes glued on the board, his hands clasped and elbows resting on the arms of the chair but the florid-faced Englishman appeared to be gazing off into space with the intent yet absent look of one absorbed in profound concentration.

Then slowly Orbit's right hand disengaged itself from the other and he moved a figure upon the board, his hand almost mechanically seeking its former position.

A little smile twitched at the corners of Sir Philip's mouth and with a swift intake of his breath he moved, sweeping from the board the figure of shining white with which Orbit had just played. The latter instantly lifted his head and raised his eyes to the high, beamed ceiling. With the slight gesture the first sound broke the stillness, as a muffled, barely audible exclamation came from Sir Philip's throat.

Orbit made one more move and then glanced in amused commiseration at his friend.

"Checkmate, Sir Philip! I shall give you your revenge in London next season!"

"I say! That was damned clever! Led me right into ambush, what? I wish some of the masters could have

seen it!—Oh, there you are, McCarty! Are you a chess player, by any chance?"

"No, sir." McCarty advanced a step farther. "Mr. Orbit, Fu Moy showed me straight in and I waited so as not to disturb you."

"That's all right!" Orbit nodded pleasantly. "Our game is over.—You have news for me?"

"Of a sort. You recall saying on Wednesday that you thanked heaven the Bellamy baby was old enough to talk?"

"Yes!" Orbit responded eagerly. "I have tried several times to see Mrs. Bellamy and little Maude, but the mother is still almost overcome by the narrow escape of her child and will not permit her out of her sight for a moment, while she herself is too prostrated to see any one."

"The little one talked to me the other day," McCarty vouchsafed.

"She did? Why didn't you tell me?" Orbit pushed back his chair and rose. "Did she see any one, hear anything? Tell me, for God's sake! This may be most important!"

His fine eyes had lighted and the latent excitement seemed to have communicated itself to his guest for Sir Philip also rose.

"No, sir. She knew no more than you or I, but she kept asking for her balloon. It seems Lucette had bought it for her off a wop by the gate just before you invited them in; 'twas a blue one, the baby said, and she was persistent about it, but I recall seeing no toy balloon in that conservatory.—Did you?"

"No." Orbit shook his head. "I really don't know, though; I didn't notice particularly. Surely it couldn't

have had anything to do with the case, though!—What is it, Fu Moy?"

The little coffee boy spoke rapidly in Chinese and after a moment Orbit turned with a gesture which included Sir Philip and McCarty.

"I am wanted on the telephone. You will excuse me?"

When he had left the room the Englishman glanced again at the chessboard with the self-centered absorption of the enthusiast.

"Too bad you didn't understand that play! Dash it all! Very clever! On the twenty-first move, his Knight captured my pawn. Check. I moved the King to the Queen's square. By Jove, he moved the Queen to Bishop's sixth. Check. I captured his Queen with my Knight and then Orbit moved his Bishop to King's seventh. Checkmate! Devilish trick, I should say. Really, McCarty, he had served me with what is known in chess parlance as 'The Immortal Partie!'"

"'Checkmate,'" repeated McCarty slowly. "That means calling the turn, then, blocking every play; not winning anything yourself but keeping the other fellow from moving! 'Tis a poor sort of victory, to my mind, but better than getting wiped off the board, and the secret of it is—looking ahead!"

CHAPTER XIX

DENNIS SUPPLIES A SIMILE

ON Saturday morning, as McCarty opened his door to proceed to breakfast he caromed violently with Dennis at the head of the stairs.

"It's a wonder you wouldn't look where you're going!" the latter observed. "I've come straight off duty without a bite or a shave to find out what's new, but not to be thrown downstairs!"

"Come on, let's eat, then," invited McCarty. "You can get a shave after and join me back here, for I've had a 'phone from the inspector and he'll be around soon; he's got something to tell us."

Their meal concluded, Dennis betook himself to his favorite barber and McCarty returned to his rooms with the usual collection of newspapers under his arm. Before the half-open door of the antique shop he paused. From an inner room at the rear came the deep strains of a 'cello in a simple, oddly insistent little tune, unsuited to the strains of a stringed instrument, until they swelled into a sweeping arpeggio accompaniment. Girard must have finished setting his stock in order, to be idling away the early morning hour with his everlasting fiddle!

Nevertheless McCarty listened for a moment longer and then, pushing open the door, he went in. The 'cello was silenced and the little old Frenchman's withered face peered out inquiringly from between the curtains.

"Ah, it is you, my friend!" He came forward in welcome. "You have heard the 'cello? She is in a bad humor because I play upon her German music once more, but it is of a quaintness and charm, that witch's song from 'Hansel und Gretel'; I go every year to hear it."

"Is that what you were playing?" McCarty asked politely. "Would it be opera, now? I'm not up in them, at all."

"It is from a fairy story for the children," Monsieur Girard explained. "The witch builds a castle of gingerbread in the woods to attract the little ones and when they touch it they are destroyed.—But tell me! You are again of the police, is it not so? You have found the murderer of my countrywoman?"

"Not yet, Girard. I just stopped by to pass the time of day, and ask you if you should see that red-headed limb of Satan, Jimmie Ballard, hanging around, tell him I've left town; he's too free with his pen entirely!" McCarty returned with some heat. Then his manner changed. "You didn't happen to notice a man who came to see me night before last, just around dark? I missed him by only a few minutes."

"But no, my friend." Girard shook his head. "It rains with such fury that one cannot see before the door and I close the shop while yet it is light.—You do not come in a long time to spend an evening with the old man!"

His tone was wistful and McCarty responded heartily:

"Sure I'll come, just as soon as this case is over! Don't forget about Jimmie!"

Leaving the shop he mounted the stairs to his apartment above, and settled himself to read the papers; but they held little of interest, and, as the inspector still delayed in coming, he got out his books once more and was

deeply engrossed when Dennis reappeared, freshly shaven and well-brushed, with a new collar an inch too small embracing his gaunt neck.

"What are you dolled up for?" his host demanded. "That collar's so tight the eyes are bulging out of your head!"

"Leave be!" retorted Dennis with dignity. "A man has a right to spruce up of a Saturday! So you're at them books again! Where's the inspector?"

"That's his ring now." McCarty rose. "Denny, mind you listen to what I tell him about Parsons, but don't add anything to it. What he don't know will save a waste of time."

"What are you—?" Dennis began, but there was no opportunity for him to finish his query; the inspector had taken the stairs two steps at a time and entered without ceremony.

"Sorry I'm late, Mac.—Hello, Riordan, on the job with us again? The medical examiner has had news from Washington."

"Washington?—Sit down, sir!—About that poison gas, you mean?" McCarty pushed forward the big armchair. "Did they find out what it's made of?"

"As much as will ever be known." The inspector's face was very grave. "I don't know whether you recall reading about it or not after all this time, but during the last months of the war a report went out from the Capital that a new poison gas had been invented, deadlier than anything yet tried. The formula was a secret one, the property of the government. The papers were full of it and preparations were being made to supply our troops with it when the armistice came. Nobody except the officials in charge of that department have thought much about

it since until our inquiries of the last day or two. Last night Hinton Sherard, the man responsible for the safety of that folio of secret documents, blew his brains out; the formula for the poison gas had disappeared."

"And 'tis that the murderer used?" Dennis stared. "Did he steal it from the department?"

"Theft would have been impossible, except for some one on the inside but the despatches in code from Washington indicate that Sherard has been deeply involved in some foreign financial scandal. He managed to extricate himself about two months ago by the payment of a large sum; the affair only reached the ears of the departmental heads when he killed himself publicly in the main dining-room of the Weyland Hotel and as he never had as much money as he is reputed to have paid out there's only one construction to be put on it. He must have sold the formula for that gas."

"It must have taken a mint of money to buy it," McCarty observed thoughtfully. "Any of them that live on the Mall could have afforded it, I suppose, providing they wanted it bad enough but—two months ago! The murderer sure planned a good ways ahead! Are you certain there's no mistake about it? If nobody knows the formula—?"

"The chemist who invented it is still living and three other men in official Washington are familiar with its component parts. They all agree that the effect of the gas inhaled by Lucette, as shown by the autopsy, was identical with what would have been produced by the action of this unnamed gas, and nothing else known to chemistry would have had just that result.—Try one of these instead, Mac; old Mr. Parsons gave them to me and though he doesn't smoke himself they ought to be good." He had drawn

a handful of fragrant cigars from his pocket as McCarty proffered the box from the mantel. "The important thing to us about this affair is that Washington is all excited and determined to get our man and the formula before it passes out of his hands, perhaps into those of some foreign power, do you see?"

"In case there's another war?"

"Exactly. They're sending on some picked men from the Secret Service to investigate and you know what that will mean; the case will be practically taken out of our hands."

"To the everlasting shame of the Force, and through us!" McCarty sprang to his feet and paced rapidly back and forth. "It's hell, ain't it, inspector? We've done all that mortal could and been blocked at every turn, like Sir Philip in the chess game with Orbit last night; 'twould be the devil and all if we fall down on it now!"

"You'll not!" Dennis sat up suddenly, the ashes from his pipe falling upon the book laid open across his knee. "Don't mind him, sir! He's got something up his sleeve, he as good as told me so yesterday afternoon!"

"Denny!" McCarty paused, grimacing horribly at the base informer. "Don't you listen to him, inspector! I had just a notion with nothing to back it up, and if I sprung it now and it turned out to be wide of the mark there's no corner of this earth could hide us from what would come!"

"What is it?" the inspector demanded. "For God's sake, Mac, don't hold out anything now! It's more than your record or my career that is at stake; the pride of the whole department is in our hands! What is this notion, as you call it?"

McCarty shook his head.

"It's no use, sir! If I had one hint of even circumstantial evidence to support it, I wouldn't be loafing here this minute, but I'll tell you what I will do. Come noon, I'm thinking I'll know whether there's anything in it or no and if there is I'll be 'phoning to headquarters, with a request that'll maybe surprise you. Whatever it is you'll let me have it, for well you know I'd make no move unless I was sure."

There was an unmistakable note of finality in his tone and Inspector Druet acknowledged it with a shrug. In his troubled eyes a renewed glow of hope had come.

"By noon?" he repeated. "I'll be there waiting for your message, Mac."

"Meanwhile," McCarty carefully avoided Dennis' gaze, "I've a bit of news for you, sir. Denny and me have managed to lay our hands on the papers that have been missing from Parsons' house."

"I thought you would!" The shadow of a smile passed across the inspector's face. "The department doesn't countenance burglary, of course, but when two such deputies as you take matters into your own hands I wash mine of the responsibility. What did you find out?"

Dennis was endeavoring to hide behind his book but his agonized contortions bore mute testimony to his guilt. McCarty gazed at his old superior with a world of reproach.

" 'Tis not what I expected from you, sir, after all these years, but we'll try to bear up under the injustice of it! The papers came to us in a confidential way and since all Parsons wants is to get them back again there's no harm done."

"Look here!" The amusement had faded from the

inspector's countenance. "Orbit's house was broken into that same night and he was chloroformed—!"

"May my right arm drop off this minute if we had anything to do with that!" McCarty's solemn tones held the ring of truth. "I won't say that I've not my own suspicions about it, but they come to me since and they're all part and parcel of that notion I've got concerning the whole case. However, getting back to Parsons, maybe you'd like to look over what was stolen from his filing case in that outrageous robbery. You'll know then why the housemaid and the page boy looked familiar to you."

He handed the records of Parsons' domestic staff to the inspector and watched with a twinkle as the other ran quickly through them. When his astonished comments had ceased, he produced the manuscript notes but drew no attention to the reference to flourine gas, nor did he mention the leaf he had torn from the encyclopædia as he briefly recounted the interview with the eccentric philanthropist on the previous day.

"I left asking myself was he a crook or a crank or a saint on earth?" he concluded. "What's your opinion of him?"

"He may be a dreamer, with a lot of ideas for bettering the world, that will never work out while we're full of original sin, but I think he's a wonderful old character and worthy of his family," the inspector replied reflectively. "I was talking to one of these psycho-analysts who is going to lecture to us in the commissioner's new school the other day and he knew all about them; it seems they're celebrated among students of heredity as a shining example of what good blood means. There are thousands of 'Parsons,' I suppose, but I'm talking about the de-

scendants of the first David Parsons and the old gentleman we know is the last in the direct male line."

"I know," McCarty remarked. "Five governors they've given to the New England states, eight clergymen in America, fourteen foreign missionaries, eleven college professors and two of them became college presidents, and I can't recall how many army and navy officers and other big men. I've been looking them up a little, myself."

"The devil you have!" The inspector stared. "Keeping up with the commissioner's latest innovations, eh? Did you know that the Parsons have been contrasted by these same students of heredity with another family that's supposed to be the worst on record?"

"I've no way of getting at things like those psychoanalysts," McCarty responded apologetically. "What about this other family?"

"I've forgotten the name but they died out long ago, the male members, anyway. Every kind of crime and general crookedness was represented among them.—But we're wasting time. I suppose you want me to return these papers to Parsons with the best excuse I can think of?"

"No. We've an hour to spare before we can do anything, and Denny and me thought we'd take them to him ourselves." McCarty gazed ceilingward through the wreaths of smoke. "Denny wants a little talk with him."

"Every day," Dennis laid down his book at last. "Every day, in every way, my friend Timothy McCarty is getting to be a better and better liar—"

"Denny, what have you got hold of now!" McCarty flushed hotly.

"One of your new lesson books," the other replied with

immense satisfaction. "'Tis by a foreign gentleman with a name like an Australian bushranger's call—"

"I bought it by mistake, thinking it was about this psycho-stuff too, because I couldn't understand it!" McCarty slammed the desk drawer upon the embarrassing volume and turned to the inspector, who had risen. "You're going, sir? It may be a little past noon when I call you up, but you'll hear from me one way or the other."

Mutual recriminations of a more or less acrimonious nature took place after the inspector's departure but they merely cleared the air. Finally McCarty remarked:

"I gave myself away as well as you about breaking into the Parsons house, but that was only after you'd told the inspector I was holding out on him, which I wasn't, having nothing to hold. As to getting at criminals by way of science I'm not laughing at it, Denny, just because I'm not on to it yet."

"Nor me!" Dennis agreed. "Only to my mind, science is a lot like spontaneous combustion; if you don't handle it careful it'll work up its own heat and break out in a blaze."

"Like what?" McCarty paused with his hat half-way to his head.

"Spontaneous combustion." Dennis repeated. "When anything that generates its own heat, like hay in a stable, is shut up too long without air getting to it, it's liable to take fire by itself. That's one of the first things ever I learned when I joined the department."

McCarty chuckled.

"And that's your idea of science, is it? Maybe 'tis as good as any other!—Now let's go and ease the old gentleman's mind about his stolen property."

But they were destined to meet with still another delay, for on entering the west gate of the Mall they encountered Mr. Gardner Sloane. The supercilious manner had fallen from him and he greeted them with marked cordiality.

"Horrible week we've been through, gentlemen!" he declaimed. "Leaving the death of Orbit's valet out of it, a murder, a kidnapping and two robberies make a frightful record to contemplate. I trust you are taking every measure to protect us here? By gad, there's no telling where this thing will strike next!"

"Did you ever find your key to the gates?" McCarty asked suddenly.

"Confound it, no; had to have another one made!" Sloane fumed. "Let me see, it was a week ago that I missed it. I'd used it Saturday morning to enter the east gate, I remember it distinctly, and I must have dropped it near the Parsons house.—But I hope you'll tell your inspector that I depend on him to have a special watch kept over our home; my father had a very bad turn on Tuesday and if any excitement like a burglary were to take place it might prove fatal."

"Did you get a good nurse for him?" McCarty asked solicitously. "The last one you had beat it, didn't he?"

"Otto? Oh, he's back; came Tuesday afternoon, fortunately. Stupid ass but a splendid attendant and my father's used to him.—You won't forget to have us properly guarded?"

McCarty reassured him heartily and as they watched him swing off toward the Avenue with a jaunty air Dennis remarked:

"So Lindholm showed up again, and we never even thought of it! On Tuesday, too! Do you suppose—?"

"I'm through supposing!" McCarty interrupted. "We'll stop by and find out!"

The Sloane house, in spite of its almost oppressive luxury, unmistakably betrayed the fact that a feminine hand had been for long absent from its care and arrangement. There was a cold, detached air about as though those beneath its roof were transients with no foothold and little interest of a personal nature. Dennis voiced his impression when the ancient butler had hobbled away to summon the nurse.

"'Tis like a hotel!" he whispered. "Grander than most, but public like. If 'twas the old days I'd have been minded to ask the old guy where the café was!"

"You're not used to the high society we've been moving in lately, Denny," McCarty replied, adding, as soft but heavy feet padded down the wide center staircase of the reception hall: "Wisht! Here comes the squarehead!"

The man who entered almost before the words had left his lips was a blond, massively built giant with an up-standing brush of hair so light as to be almost colorless, and sleepy blue eyes in a round face ruddy with health.

"Ay Otto Lindholm." He bent a mildly inquiring gaze upon them. "You bane same mans dat go to my missus?"

"Sure we are!" McCarty beamed in a friendly fashion. "What the devil did you run away for? You'd nothing to fear because of a row with Hughes!"

"My woman!" Otto shrugged as if that settled the matter. "Ay tal her we better stay but she has a scare on. You bane married, you know."

"Neither of us, thank God!" McCarty replied de-

voutly. "You quarreled with Hughes on Thursday night a week ago, didn't you?"

"Ay tal him he keep 'way from my woman or Ay bane goin' to fix him." He spoke with stolid satisfaction. "Next time he write latter to her Ay bane kick him 'roun' de street like yaller dog. Dat's all."

His clear, placid eyes regarded them still in good-humored inquiry and McCarty asked:

"When did you see him again?"

"De next night. Friday."

"What-t!" The quiet answer had been all but overwhelming, but Otto seemed unconscious of its portent.

"De next night," he repeated patiently. "It bane yust start to rain an' he var sitting on stoop of house t'ree street down, holting on wit' bote han's to stomach. He var ver' sick mans. Ay tal him Ay take him home but he tal me go to hell. He look w'ite lak sheet, Ay t'ank he bane soffer mooch but he say he bane goin' walk it off. Dat's last Ay see of him."

"You went on and left him sitting there? That would be about eight o'clock?"

"Yes, 'bout eight. Ay stay to see can Ay halp him but he get oop an' walk 'way. Ay t'ank to mysalf den he look lak deat' but Ay did not guess it var poison. He tal me he bane get sick at dinner an' Ay t'ank he yust eat too mooch." Otto shook his head. "Hughes var bad mans but murder is not so good! Dat Calabar bean he bane get here in de Mall, sure!"

CHAPTER XX

MAX

"IS that the poor beast you told me about?" It was an hour later, and McCarty and Dennis were coming down the steps of the Parsons residence. The latter pointed across the street to where Max was prowling up and down the court.

"Yes. He'll go on like that till he drops in his tracks." A certain note of grimness had crept into McCarty's tone. "I wonder if Orbit went down to the boat to see his friend off? I'd like a word with him if Sir Philip has gone."

"We've had words, in a manner of speaking, with more than one this morning!" Dennis remarked. "We know as much now as we did before but we've not gone a step forward and 'tis near noon . . . Look at Little Fu Moy!"

The Chinese boy, looking, in his drab, everyday attire, like some dun-colored moth, had emerged from the side door of the house where he was employed and approached the dog, holding a bit of cake out in one brown little hand, but Max's somber eyes showed no glint of recognition and he swung out of the child's way, staggering in sheer weakness until he regained his poise.

Fu Moy stood still, his hand dropped to his side, and the piece of cake falling to the pavement of the court.

"You go ring the bell, Denny, and ask for Mr. Orbit,"

McCarty directed. "I'll be with you in a minute. If Ching Lee takes you to him say you'll wait for me, that I've something more to ask him."

Dennis obeyed but when Ching Lee appeared and he voiced his query the Oriental shook his head.

"Mr. Orbit is not at home. He has gone down to the wharf with Sir Philip, whose ship sails at noon."

"Then I'll wait for him." Dennis announced firmly. "My friend McCarty will be along in a little while. When Mr. Orbit gets back, tell him the two of us are here."

Ching Lee showed him to the library and with a bow left him, and Dennis seated himself, feeling regretfully of the pipe in his pocket. What McCarty had in mind he could not conjecture and there was no telling when Orbit might return to find him waiting there without an idea in his head and afraid to open his mouth for fear of balling up the game.

Had Mac just been kidding when he told the inspector he'd know by noon whether his notion was fact or not? He'd learned nothing since but a lot of corroborative detail about things that didn't matter, anyway. Why on earth was he hanging around outside, fooling with the dog?

Time crawled. Twenty minutes had passed by the great old grandfather's clock in the corner and still McCarty did not put in an appearance. Dennis rose at last and tip-toed out across the hall and down to the cardroom, where he cautiously opened the side door leading to the court. There stood McCarty, chinning and laughing with the little Chink as if he'd not a care in the world!

Dennis took a tentative step forward, but at that mo-

ment McCarty turned with a pat on the shoulder to Fu Moy and started for the rear of the house. Dennis was forced to beat a hasty retreat lest the boy find him spying.

What could Mac have found to talk about to the lad? Dennis knew him too well to be taken in by that idly jocular air, and he'd not be wasting a minute at this stage of the game. Could it be from somebody in Orbit's household, after all, that Hughes had got his death-dose and poor Lucette that puff of poisoned air? Could the boy Horace be even now hidden in some secret corner of Chinatown or the French quarter?

He had little opportunity to speculate further, for the front door opened and after a moment Orbit's tones came to him raised in singsong Chinese. Little Fu Moy replied and then the master of the house entered.

"Good morning, Riordan. Where is McCarty? Fu Moy says you both wished to see me. What can I do for you?"

For a horrible moment Dennis' tongue clove to the roof of his mouth and then an inspiration came.

"Mac has something to ask you, Mr. Orbit, but he was stopped outside. He'll be in right away. 'Twas about that chloroforming the other night that I wanted to see you. You woke up sick and found nothing had been touched, but there was the bottle and the towel, and the side door open downstairs. Did you happen to notice anything else?"

"Only proof that there were two of them," Orbit responded thoughtfully. "I forgot to mention that to the inspector. One had big hands, fat, and a trifle soft, but the other's were thin and strong with a wiry grip and a broken finger on the left one."

"You don't tell me!" Dennis ejaculated and his own left hand promptly fumbled with his coat pocket as though seeking cover there. Then in confusion it dropped to his side again. "And how might you be knowing that? Sure, the inspector said you'd no time to move, before the towel was clapped down over your face!"

"They had left their marks behind them." Orbit laughed. "Fat Hands had raised my windows higher and he must have been the one who actually drugged me, for Broken Finger was nervous and during that operation he gripped the post at the foot of my bed so tightly that the impression was plainly left in the satiny finish of the wood. The prints could have been made by none of the household when they came in response to my ring, for Ching Lee's hands are very long and slender, Jean's as thin as claws and André's fat but small. Fu Moy did not wake up and I would not permit Sir Philip or his man to be disturbed."

"Maybe there was more than two of them," Dennis suggested hopefully. "Was there nothing else but just them finger marks? The bureau don't take so much stock in that kind of evidence any more, what with the new science and such."

"New science?" Orbit raised his brows. "Do you mean the crime-detecting machines imported from some of the European capitals? But that was some years ago."

"No, sir." Dennis' thoughts went swiftly back to more than one experience he had had with automatic informers in company with McCarty during earlier days. "This is no test of your breathing, nor pulse, nor sweat-glands, nor yet how quick you can think when a lie comes in handy. 'Tis the crime itself that tells nowa-

days what manner of man committed it and what kind of people he sprung from; I've no doubt but that soon they'll have it down so pat they can tell a guy's color and religion and politics by the turn of a knife or the course of a bullet! It's a wonder anybody got hung at all in the old days!"

"Mr. Orbit?" McCarty unannounced appeared at last in the doorway. "Sorry if I've kept you waiting. Has Sir Philip Devereux gone?"

"He sailed less than an hour ago." Orbit eyed him inquiringly. "Your associate tells me you have something to ask me."

"About Hughes, it was. He'd not been looking so well lately. Do you know had he been taking any medicine?"

"Really, I couldn't say." He shrugged. "It didn't occur to me to ask him!"

"That's that, then!" McCarty seemed lost in thought for a minute. "Who is it drinks milk in the household?"

"Milk?" Orbit smiled. "Fu Moy, perhaps, but you will have to ask him. The only one I know to be fond of it is Vite, the monkey; it is one of his main articles of diet."

As though the mention of his name had summoned him, a little brownish-gray shape sidled in over the doorsill, paused for a moment and then sprang through the air to land lightly on Orbit's shoulder and sit chattering impertinently at the intruders.

"Silence, Vite! Where are your manners?" His owner stroked him gently. "Why do you ask about the milk, McCarty?"

"It isn't of any matter, sir. The medical examiner

was saying that 'twas only in medicine or milk the Calabar bean powder could be dissolved."

Orbit moved with a slight trace of impatience.

"Surely such minor details are unimportant just at this time, anxious as I am to have the mystery concerning Hughes' death cleared up! Nothing can restore him or that poor girl who died so strangely in my house, but there is Horace Goddard! This is the fourth day since his inexplicable disappearance and his father tells me that no effort has been made to approach him for ransom. If the boy has not been killed in some accident he may be in horrible danger! He is delicate, he could not long endure hardships, privation." Orbit hesitated and then went on: "I don't know whether the suggestion may be worth anything or not, but has his own home been searched thoroughly? It is an enormous, rambling old house with innumerable store-rooms and closets upstairs—I have remembered them since I was a mere lad. Horace is a solitary, meditative little chap, fond of getting away by himself. Isn't it possible that he may have gone up to some portion of the attic and either fastened himself in or been locked away there by some one who didn't know he was around? Finding he couldn't get out he may have been frightened, fainted,—the possibilities are too awful to be imagined!"

"No, there's no chance of that, for every inch of the house has been gone over a dozen times, but it may be, of course, that he met with an accident somewhere and the body hasn't come to light yet; the inspector was saying something like that awhile ago. The lad could have been dead even before he was missed by Trafford; you recall the tutor coming here to ask for him that day

whilst we were talking to you? The coal men had been after getting in your supply—?"

"Yes, yes!" Orbit nodded quickly, impatience at McCarty's garrulity evident in his voice now. "Most inconvenient time, too, just before the arrival of my guests! I had ordered it days before.—But these idle speculations about Horace won't help any, I suppose; the Goddards themselves can scarcely be more anxious than I am for some real results from this investigation!"

"Well, the inspector'll be around in a little while, if you're home." McCarty signaled to Dennis with a jerk of his head. "There's something in his mind he wants to talk to you about, and maybe you can help him. We've not made much headway, and that's a fact, but 'tis the worst case ever the department handled."

There was an injured note in his voice and Orbit responded with sympathetic tact:

"I'm sure you're doing all you can and I shall be glad to see the inspector or either of you at any time." He pressed the bell and as Ching Lee threw open the door he added: "The medical examiner has come to no definite conclusion about the girl's death? If it was really gas of some sort it seems odd its nature can't be determined. But I speak ignorantly, of course; I know little or nothing of chemistry in any form. . . . I shall wait to hear from the inspector."

"I don't get you this morning at all!" Dennis remarked plaintively when the door of Orbit's house had closed behind them. "While I waited I saw you kidding the little heathen out in the side court and then you went to the back, and Orbit came in and I had to string him. For what did we go there in the first place? You'd little to ask him and you got less for it, when

you did finally come in! Is it stalling around for time, you are?"

"There'll be no more stalling, Denny!" There was a new note in McCarty's voice. " 'Twas little I got from Orbit himself, but we'll go to Goddard now. I want to use his telephone."

"Why didn't you use Orbit's?" Dennis demanded. Then a light broke over his face. " 'Tis the inspector you'll be calling up and there's them in that house back there—! Mac, for the love of the saints, have you found out something? Have you struck it at last?"

The dog Max who was lying in the patch of sunlight that filtered down between the houses, raised his head at the eager expectancy of Dennis' tone and McCarty glanced at him thoughtfully.

" 'Twas not me that struck anything, Denny, and 'tis only a guess yet but 'twas *it* ought to have struck *me* before this!" he replied. "We'll have a little while to wait, and I'll thank you to keep Goddard and that Trafford talking and not leave them out of your sight whilst I'm telephoning; I don't want either of them listening in!"

"Then 'tis one of them, as well as somebody in Orbit's house—!" Dennis gaped in amazement. "Mac, what kind of a devilish plot is it? You said last night 'twas too sickening to talk about—!"

" 'Tis worse!" McCarty interrupted tersely. "Let be till we see what comes!"

Winch the butler, looking more aged and fragile than ever, ushered them into the drawing-room where Goddard presently appeared followed by Trafford. The stout little man had changed markedly in the past few days; his eyes were dim and the flesh of his face hung in folds as

though deflated, while his voice had the trembling overtone of that of an old man.

"You—you have news for us, McCarty? Some word has reached you of—of Horace?"

"I think I know where he will be in a little while, Mr. Goddard," McCarty replied quietly. "I'll have to ask you to wait, though, till the inspector gets here, and I'll have to 'phone him. Can I use the one in your smoking-room? I want to be dead sure it's private for I've got to talk confidential.—Thanks, Trafford, I know the way."

Waiting only for Goddard's nod he cast a quick admonitory glance at Dennis and hastened away. The latter cast about wildly in his mind for a safe topic to pursue, but the burden was lifted from him.

"What is it, Riordan? For God's sake, what does McCarty mean?" Goddard turned to him.

"I've no notion," Dennis replied, truthfully enough. "He's been working on something for the last day or two while I was on—on other duty, but I expect things will be moving now. You've heard nothing yourself?"

"Nothing!" Goddard raised a shaking hand to his forehead. "I tell you, Riordan, we can't—we can't endure much more of this! If my boy were in his grave we would at least know it and learn somehow to bear it but the uncertainty is driving us mad! Unless we know the truth soon I shall lose my wife, too!"

"We'll know." Dennis spoke with the assurance of utter conviction. "Mac's not one to start anything he can't finish and I've worked on too many cases with him not to know the signs. If he says the lad will be found in a little while he means it but—but maybe it'll be sick or something he'll be. Worrying, you see, and being away from home—!"

Words failed him, for he had read in that ominous quietude of McCarty's voice a hint of trouble yet to come. He floundered desperately in a tender-hearted attempt to pave the way. The situation was saved for him by the sudden reappearance of McCarty himself in the doorway.

"Denny, go out and call Yost in; the inspector has instructions for him." The latent excitement had intensified in his tone. "Don't tell the whole block what you're doing, either!"

"I don't know, myself!" Dennis retorted, preparing nevertheless to obey. "Shall I take his place?"

"Now you're talking!" McCarty nodded approval. "He'll have a message for you when he comes out and 'twill be all right to do what he says. The other night in my rooms when we were starting out to pay a couple of calls I gave you something to carry; did you think to bring it with you now?"

The revolver! Dennis started violently and one hand sought his hip pocket involuntarily as he nodded.

"All right. You'll know what to do with it after you've talked to Yost. Send him in."

Dennis departed, found the headquarters' man patrolling listlessly on the sidewalk and delivered the message. Then he paced from gate to gate in a daze of bewildered thought. Things were indeed moving. He could not fathom what was in McCarty's mind, but he felt a grim portent in the very air of the sunlit, semi-deserted block, like the shuddering silence before a blast.

The elder Sloane returned; the housemaid from Mrs. Bellamy's who had taken charge of little Maude immediately after Wednesday's tragedy went out upon an errand and came back before Yost left the Goddard

house. When he reached Dennis' side his former listlessness had vanished.

"Who's gone out of the Mall?" he demanded.

"Only a hired girl from Mrs. Bellamy's, and she came in again." Dennis replied. "What is it? Mac said you'd tell me what to do, and he asked had I a gun with me. I have."

"Then go take the east gate." Yost pointed. "Open it if any one wants to come in but let no one out if you have to drill them full of holes! Get me?"

"'Tis the clearest thing I've heard this day!" Dennis averred. "I'll do no drilling but there'll no one pass me! What in hell is doing, do you know?"

"Only that the inspector's coming as fast as the chief's own car can get here and he's bringing a young army with him! It looks like the end of it, Riordan!—Hey, there goes the Bellamy butler! I'll have to head him off, for I'm taking the west gate myself. There's somebody wanting to get in yours."

Dennis hurried to the gate opening on the Avenue and with much ceremony admitted an open touring car in which sat a young lady so bewilderingly beautiful that he gaped after her in respectful admiration until she disappeared in the Parsons house. Was that the old gentleman's niece? He was recalled to his present duties only when the chauffeur turned and drove straight toward him once more, halting only a bare few feet away.

"Hi, there! Open the gate!"

"Nothing doing," Dennis retorted firmly. "Orders from police headquarters. Them that gets in, stays in."

"Yah! You green rookie! I'm Mr. Parsons' chauffeur, if that means anything to you, and I'm in a hurry!"

"Then you're going to be disappointed." With a gin-

gerly reluctance which would have meant sudden death had he been faced by an earnest antagonist, Dennis produced his revolver. "'Twould mean nothing if you drove the chariot of the Angel Gabriel, you'd not get through that gate!"

A wordy combat ensued interrupted only by the appearance on the Avenue side of the barrier of young Mr. Brinsley Sloane. He hesitated, turning slightly pale at sight of Dennis' formidable weapon. The latter called out peremptorily:

"'Round to the other gate if you want to get in! This guy'll get out if you open this one! Police orders!"

"Really!" Brinsley Sloane stared through his huge-rimmed glasses. "This is extraordinary! What has the fellow done, officer?"

Dennis swelled visibly at the appellation.

"Nothing yet," he admitted. "He won't, either, unless he's wishful to croak!"

"Is the fellow mad?" Young Sloane addressed the chauffeur who, scenting an ally, broke into injured explanations. The argument became a triangular affair although the scion of the Sloanes remained discreetly on the neutral ground beyond the gate. It was ended at last by a subdued hubbub at the farther one. Dennis turned to behold the inspector drive slowly in with several familiar officials of the department; his car was followed by a larger one packed with husky men and bristling with long-handled shovels.

Dennis uttered a startled exclamation and Brinsley Sloane let himself hurriedly in with his key while the Parsons' chauffeur no longer exhibited any desire to depart. Martin appeared suddenly from nowhere and addressed the astounded deputy.

"Beat it, Riordan; Mac wants you! I'll take over your job."

Dennis needed no second bidding. He set off at a shambling run, unconsciously brandishing his revolver as he went and Goddard, Trafford and McCarty emerged from the house to meet him. He noticed as in a daze that the tutor braced his employer with an almost filial manner and the older man leaned heavily upon him, pallid but composed.

The men with the shovels were piling out of the second car and he saw that they carried in addition enormous sooty baskets. His eyes turned wonderingly to McCarty as the inspector hurried up.

"All set, Mac! The boys are posted all around the walls. What do you want done?"

"Open that coal chute first!" McCarty pointed to the square iron plate like a trap-door in the center of the side court, over which Max was still hovering. "Then send your men down in Orbit's cellar to dig like hell! There's thirty tons to be moved by the ten of them in an hour and a thousand dollars from Mr. Goddard to the guy that takes out the last shovelful. Go to it!"

Ching Lee had appeared in the front door of the Orbit house and Jean at the side one, while André peered from the kitchen window. All at once the houseman was brushed aside and Orbit strode out.

"What's the meaning of this?" he demanded.

"We're going to move your coal, Mr. Orbit,—the coal that was put in so quick the very hour that Horace Goddard disappeared!" McCarty replied. He turned abruptly to the group who were lifting the cover of the chute. As it rose and then fell back ringing on the pavement, a

longdrawn howl broke upon the air; Max, tense and quivering, was gazing down into the aperture and McCarty motioned toward him.

" 'Twas him and not me got the hunch first, inspector. 'Twas the lad's pal, here—Max!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE BLACK PYRE

"GOOD GOD!" Orbit exclaimed in horrified accents. "You don't mean that the little fellow tumbled down the chute! That he was buried beneath the coal!—Goddard, my old friend, what can I say to you! Surely this is only a vague supposition, a last resort! It would be too dreadful, too pitiful!"

Goddard's face worked but he was unable to reply and Orbit turned to the men who, with baskets and shovels, were filing around the rear of the house.

"I'll add a thousand to Mr. Goddard's! Work as you never did before!—Inspector, can such a fearful thing have occurred? It is incredible! How could the little chap have fallen down to the cellar without being seen? I suppose any outcry he might have made would have been drowned by the noise of the coal itself but—oh, it is too utterly horrible!"

His shocked, broken tones trailed away into silence and then from below there ascended through the open chute the ring of shovels and the clatter of coal falling rhythmically into the baskets. A tortured groan was forced from Goddard's lips. Max crouched with his forepaws hanging over the edge of the aperture and his nose low between them, the hair rising in a ridge along his back and a soft, anxious whine pulsing from his throat.

Dennis turned away with a shiver, and saw that Gardner Sloane had joined his son on the fringe of the group. Snape and the maids of Mrs. Bellamy's staff were gathered in a little knot just behind, with the Parsons' chauffeur, Danny Sayre the page boy, and the aged butler of the Sloanes, while Benjamin Parsons himself had emerged upon the steps of his home and the lower windows of the Goddard house were thronged with the servants. From a window just above Orbit's conservatory the staring face of little Fu Moy looked down in shrinking wonder.

The rhythmic, dreadful scrape and rumble from beneath their feet went on as though it would never end. Goddard swayed weakly but Trafford flung an arm about his shoulders. The inspector had replied to Orbit with noncommittal gravity and now they conversed together in an aside, while Dennis edged over to McCarty.

"Why ever didn't you tell me?" he whispered. "No wonder you said 'twas fair sickening to think of, Mac! If the poor boy's found down there 'twill be one crime that's no crime at all! How did you know?"

"I don't now!" McCarty responded candidly. "'Tis the only guess, though, that will cover the facts as they come to me, but Max needed none; I'm banking on the dog's instinct, Denny."

"Look at the back of him! It makes my own hair lift the hat from my head to see it!" Dennis shivered again. "Will they never have done with the shoveling? I could scream like a woman!"

Some of the Bellamy servants had indeed begun to sob hysterically but they quieted at a look from McCarty. Parsons was slowly crossing the street and his chauffeur stepped aside for him. Dennis saw that several older

men from the detective bureau were circulating unobtrusively among the different groups and two of the officials who had come in the car with the inspector approached him now. He presented them to Orbit and the interrupted consultation was resumed now between the four.

Dennis surreptitiously took out his watch, an ancient affair of the turnip variety. The men had been at work for nearly forty minutes; he recalled the blowing of the one o'clock whistles when Martin came to relieve him at the east gate. In a little while, now, they would know the worst! If only the dog would stop whining!

He looked at Trafford and the young man met his glance with a stare of agonized inquiry but the man he was supporting reeled and he braced himself for a firmer hold. Then Benjamin Parsons stepped quietly to Goddard's other side.

"Lean on me, my friend." He spoke in the gentlest of accents. "I am old but strong, an elder brother here to lend a hand. We will wait, and pray."

Goddard's dull eyes filmed and he rested his hand in the arm offered, saying no word. A lump rose in Dennis' throat.

"Mac, for the love of God, will they finish this? 'Tis more than mortal can bear! I've dug at a fallen wall with the bare hands of me and the best lads of my company buried under it, but 'twas not as bad as this! Orbit's all in, and no wonder!"

Henry Orbit had turned and was gazing at the coal chute in horrified fascination, his highly-bred face quivering and eyes glowing with an awful intensity. As though drawn toward it against his will he advanced a step or

two and the officials also moved forward. Then he seemed for the first time to behold McCarty.

"Had you the least suspicion of this when you came to me an hour or so ago?" he asked, his voice a mere toneless breath. "Why did you not tell me? I have three strong men in my house and I myself would have led them! Is this your doing?"

"The inspector brought them, Mr. Orbit." McCarty replied. "I told you he was coming in a little while but he don't always tell me what he's got planned."

"He should at least have notified me!" Orbit ran his hand through his dark, graying hair. "I could have started the work.—But this is sheer madness! The child cannot have met such a horrible death!"

"We'll know soon enough." McCarty's tone held a note of sternness. "In a minute or two more—!"

As though his words were a signal, the clank and rattling patter from below ceased abruptly and a moment of electrified stillness ensued. Then it was broken by a rising murmur of hoarse voices which were in turn drowned by the sustained hail of coal being flung in every direction.

Orbit uttered a stifled exclamation and then stood immovable as a second groan forced its way from Goddard. One of the Bellamy maids shrieked aloud. Then the noise from the cellar ceased once more and the dog rose slowly lifting his nose into the air. A low, wailing cry broke from him. At that moment a grimy head and shoulders rose in the opening of the coal chute and a hoarse, shuddering voice addressed McCarty.

"We've—found it, sir!"

The various groups merged and swept toward the aperture then shrank back again in horror. A hubbub

of subdued cries came from among them but Eustace Goddard did not hear. His head had fallen forward, his knees sagged and doubled and he slumped, insensible, between the two who supported him. Instantly two plain-clothes men were beside them and the unconscious man was carried into his house.

It was significant that neither McCarty, the inspector, nor the two officials had moved to assist him. Now as Orbit, after his first horrified recoil from the brusque announcement, turned and hurried into the house they followed, with Dennis bringing up the rear.

Aware of his doubtful status in the eyes of the strange officials he remained discreetly in the background and when he caught up to the little group they were standing in the rear hall before the open door leading to the cellar steps, with Orbit at their head and Ching Lee, André and Jean by the pantry.

Orbit was staring down into the brazen, orange glow of the electric lights in the cellar, listening to the shuffle of feet and the murmur of rough voices lowered in pity. Then there came a slow tread and two of the shovelers appeared bearing between them something slender and pathetically small wrapped in a heavy dark cloth.

As they ascended the stairs the servants and even the officials drew back but Orbit stood his ground with no sound or movement. Only his eyes followed the men with their burden as they mounted, passing him so closely that he could have reached out and touched them. Then he turned and passed upstairs to his sitting-room, followed by his uninvited guests.

The murmur outside rose to a swelling chorus of cries and then was abruptly shut out by the closing of the door. Orbit turned with both hands raised to his head

and a shuddering groan came from his shaking lips.

"This is horrible!" he gasped. "Gentlemen, I shall ask you for an explanation, but not at this moment—I am too inexpressibly shocked—"

"The explaining will have to be done now, Orbit!" McCarty, after a glance at his superior, stepped forward. "'Twill not come from us, either!"

"What do you mean?" Orbit demanded. "Surely you are not mad enough to insinuate that I knew that the child was lying there? It is monstrous! Do you think I would not have let you know?"

He turned to the inspector.

"Inspector, when did you learn what had become of the poor little fellow?"

"I didn't; it was McCarty," the inspector admitted frankly. "He told me this morning that he might have news for me by noon but until he telephoned ordering the squad of men with shovels I hadn't an inkling."

"Then you—?" Orbit turned again to McCarty.

"'Twas the dog first put it in my head by hovering all the time about that coal chute," the latter responded. There was a new note in his voice as he went on. "It struck me too, as kind of funny you'd be having that coal put in an hour before your party, dirtying the place all up; even if it had been ordered you could have sent it away again for you'd not be lighting up your furnace for weeks yet. I found then that you never ordered it till half an hour before it got here and you'd 'phoned three times, at that, to hurry it up, yet you told me this morning that it had been arranged for days ago. About twenty minutes before you sent for it first you went down to the kitchen and got a glass of milk from André. Did you drink it yourself, Henry Orbit?"

"I did not!" Orbit's eyes seemed burning into his face. "It was for Vite, the monkey!"

"But Vite was locked up at the top of the house to be out of the way of the party and Ching Lee had the only key; Fu Moy told me so."

"Fu Moy is only a child and does not understand English well; Vite was not locked up until just before my guests arrived. What are you trying to insinuate?"

"Nothing. I'm telling you what I know. Fu Moy understands a lot more than you think, Orbit! What time did Horace Goddard come over to see you Tuesday afternoon? If that glass of milk was for the monkey, why didn't you ring for it instead of going yourself to the kitchen; was it because you wanted nobody to know the lad was here? What did you put in that milk, Orbit, to make Horace unconscious or kill him, the way you poisoned Hughes? I know from André how you got all the servants out of the kitchen and pantries after, so you could get the lad's body down to the cellar without being seen but *why* did you do it? What reason had you for bringing such a horrible death on the child who'd done you no harm? What reason did you have for murdering the valet who'd looked out for your comfort for more than twenty years? Why did you put poison gas made from the formula you bought from Hinton Sherard into the Bellamy baby's toy balloon to kill both her and her nurse? How did you fix it to burst when it did and what chance had you to pump the gas into it? You're far from crazy, Orbit! Why did you take the lives of these people you had no grudge against, no reason for wanting out of the way? Was it because of the blood that's in you from generations back urging you on? Answer me that, Henry Orbit!"

"I shall answer nothing—to you." Orbit's dark eyes blazed but his voice was dangerously calm. "You admit that I am not insane; I cannot say as much for you in the face of these monstrous accusations!—Inspector, if you are in authority at this highly irregular proceeding, am I to understand that I am formally charged with this atrocious series of crimes? Am I to consider myself under arrest?"

Inspector Druet glanced uncertainly at McCarty and the latter nodded, a world of mingled demand and entreaty in the slight gesture. The inspector hesitated for a moment and then drew a deep breath.

"You are!" he replied. "I arrest you, Henry Orbit, for the murders of Alfred Hughes, Horace Goddard and Lucette Guerin!"

The two other officials after a startled glance between them advanced one on each side of Orbit, but he shrugged and took a step forward.

"That being the case, I shall not say another word. Now you may play on this ridiculous farce for the moment. In the meantime, may I ask your indulgence for a few minutes? I desire merely to seat myself at that desk over there and write a short note to the one person in the world most interested, besides myself, in this extraordinary situation. I shall seal and address the envelope and leave it upon the desk, for you to deliver at your discretion. Lock the drawers of the desk if you will; I can assure you, however, that I have no intention of taking any weapon from them to defend myself or attempt assault upon you!"

The contempt in his tone was galling and even the inspector winced beneath it, so compelling and dominant was the personality of the man before him. He nodded.

"Write your note, Mr. Orbit, only make it short. If the news of this gets out before we can take you downtown all the reserves in the city couldn't protect you!"

Dennis turned in stupefied amazement to McCarty, but the latter was watching Orbit who had seated himself at the desk. He wrote, not hurriedly but without hesitation; a faintly amused smile curved his mobile lips, and when he had finished he sealed the envelope with a steady hand, wrote a name and a single line beneath it, propped it against the inkwell and rose.

"Now, gentlemen, I am at your disposal," he said. "I am ready to accompany you—*if you can find me!*"

The last words were uttered in a tone of ringing challenge and his hand slipped beneath the edge of the desk. On the instant, before the five men grouped before him could move or draw a breath the room was filled with rolling billows of black, foul smoke which belched forth in clouds from around the wainscoting of the wall as from the mouth of a volcano, obliterating everything about them.

Startled, warning exclamations came from the two officials and a cry from the inspector:

"To the windows! Look out for poison gas!"

McCarty had groped grimly forward but Dennis was more thoroughly at home in the crisis than he had been at any time since the inception of the affair. He shouted directions and encouragement, darting about as unconcernedly and with as much certitude as though his eyes could penetrate the murky, opaque gloom which enveloped him.

The sound of their own rushing footsteps and the successive crash of furniture as the officials lunged against it drowned out all others until close at hand a door

slammed and a mocking chuckle of laughter seemed to drift back to them.

"He's gone!" One of the officials gasped, as he found a window at last and flung it open.

"He won't go far!" the inspector retorted grimly. "Find all the windows and doors and let's get a draught through! I want that letter he wrote!"

In the rush of fresh air which came swirling in, the room rapidly cleared and they saw that it was indeed empty of any presence save their own but the white square of the envelope tilted against the inkwell was plainly discernible and the inspector seized upon it.

Choking, strangling, with smarting, streaming eyes, he peered closely at the inscription and then threw up his head.

"Great guns! It's addressed to McCarty!"

CHAPTER XXII

ANNIHILATION

McCARTY stumbled forward and took the envelope held out to him, turning to the window where he bent forward for the rush of cool air to play over his face. It was addressed simply to: "Ex-Roundsman McCarty" and the second line read: "Delivered by hand." Slitting it open he glanced quickly down the few lines it contained and then at his companions.

"'Tis for all of us, I'm thinking," he said. "Listen!

"'My dear McCarty. It has been a pleasure to meet such a man as you and we part with regret, at least on my side. You are quite correct in your deductions as far as you have expounded them and I regret that I cannot wait to hear you reconstruct your complete case but time presses. The last drawer of this desk at which I write has a false bottom; remove it and you will find a portion of my diary for the past fortnight, placed there in readiness for this eventuality. I bequeath it to you for your further information and in most sincere admiration, for where I go I may take nothing material with me, although I shall not leave my body behind. I am not going to death but to annihilation. Checkmate!

"'Henry Orbit.'"

"What does he mean?" the inspector demanded. "What kind of an escape has he planned? Not take his body

with him and yet not leave it behind? What's that about 'annihilation'?"

"We may know for ourselves if we stand here guessing about it instead of stopping him!" McCarty thrust the letter into his pocket and made for the door beyond which the two French servants and the Chinese one had halted. "He's planned to destroy himself entirely, body and all, and if it's by blowing the whole house up I'd not be surprised! Come on!"

The others hurried after him but in the hall he paused to confront Ching Lee.

"'Twas the man you worked for, Orbit, who was the murderer!" he announced. "You knew that, though; you suspected it from the first, after the queer way Hughes took sick from drinking the medicine Orbit mixed for him before dinner! That's why you went next morning dressed like a Chinese laborer down to the quarter where Hughes died, to get what dope you could about it! If you don't want to get pinched for being accessory, you come clean! Which way did he go just now?"

"I did not see." Ching Lee's face had betrayed no slightest flicker of emotion and his tone was perfectly composed. "I came upstairs only when the shouts and the odor of smoke led me to think that the house was on fire. I saw no one, nothing."

"Where is his laboratory? Where is it that he locks himself away sometimes, a place that none of the rest of you enters?" McCarty rapped out the questions like shots from an automatic. "There's not a minute to spare! Is it upstairs or down?"

Ching Lee was silent, but Jean with chattering teeth spoke up suddenly:

"It is upstairs! I see him when I reach the head of the

staircase. He rush' from that room through all the smoke and he is laughing! Then he mount to the next floor and on above, and in the attic there is a room which none but he may enter, which he guards with a heavy steel door—!"

"Show us where it is!" McCarty ordered. "That's where I fell down. I might have figured that a guy with his brains would have looked out for everything, even failure, and planned a way out for himself!"

He started on a shambling trot for the back stairs, with the others crowding after, but Jean slipped past him and leaped up three steps at a time. Past the guest rooms and servants' quarters to the storerooms and the attic above the searchers hurried, pausing only before a small wooden door.

"I thought you said 'twas made of steel!" McCarty turned the handle and then put his shoulder to a panel. "We'll have to break through."

"It is but the false one, the cover," explained Jean. "Just beyond is the real door of steel."

"You're sure he came this way? There's nowhere else he could be hiding?" McCarty glanced at the Frenchman and then turned to his companions. "Stand back! We'll have this down!"

But the small door was stouter than it looked and it required the combined efforts of Dennis and one of the officials as well before it yielded and crashed inward, only to lean, as Jean had said, against a second door a foot or two beyond, which presented to their impatient gaze a solid sheet of tempered steel.

"We'd never get through that except with soup and God knows what's beyond it that would blow us all into the next world!" McCarty exclaimed. "Inspector, will

you 'phone for an expert from headquarters? There's nothing to do but wait. We know where he is, though; that's some comfort!"

The inspector hurried downstairs and the others grouped themselves before the wall of steel separating them from that which lay on the other side, after clearing away the débris of the wrecked door.

"There's not a sound from in there!" Dennis moved over to McCarty. "What's he doing, do you suppose? Fixing a train of powder, belike?"

"He is not!" McCarty responded. "If he'd meant to blow us up he'd have done it down in his sitting-room instead of turning that infernal smoke on us. He must have had that all fixed and ready to blind us, so that he could make whatever kind of a getaway he'd arranged. You couldn't hear a cannon go off behind that solid steel, but whatever he's doing, 'tis only to himself; you'll mind the letter he wrote me? He wouldn't have spoke of his diary unless he intended us to read it and it's all part and parcel of his character, Denny. He couldn't bear to go without the world knowing how clever he was!"

"'Clever!'" Dennis shuddered. "But what did he do it all for, Mac? You asked him that when you accused him and he didn't answer. He'd no reason and yet he wasn't crazy! He'd such a grand manner and a way of making you feel like the scum of the earth in his presence without even trying to, that I would never have suspected him in the world! How you came to guess it is beyond me!"

"I'd the key to it all right from the start, only I didn't know it!" McCarty responded as the inspector bounded up the stairs. "I'm only disgusted that the truth didn't

come to me sooner, and maybe the little lad and the nurse Lucette would have been spared."

"Two of the best men in the department are on their way!" the inspector announced. "I had to stop to send in a second call for reserves to hold back the crowd that's trying to storm the gates, for the news has got out somehow! Martin and Yost sent in the first call but the boys who responded can do no more with that mob than a one-armed sheriff in a riot!—Any sign from in there?"

The officials shook their heads and Jean remarked:

"I have seen once, when he goes in and does not know that I am near to him. Before he close the door I think that I see others still beyond this, but they are open and at the end is a room with shelves covered with bottles and glass tubes of a strange shape. On the floor is a great round tank of some metal higher than one's head! I think then that he is perhaps a scientist, a great man! It is only after Hughes die and then the little Horace disappear that I begin to think he is a demon!—Here is André."

The stout chef had labored up the stairs and behind him the flowing robes of Ching Lee moved like a shadow.

"You shall get him?" the former demanded. "You shall put him in that chair of electricity? *Parbleu!* When I think of the little Lucette so pretty and good, and the little Horace, I could run my knives through his heart! It is I who give him with these hands the glass of milk with which he drugs the little Horace and then I watch while that mountain of coal descend into the chute and I suspect nothing! It is only when my countrywoman die there before him and they say it is the poison gas that I think of this room and the so horrible odors which come from it when he open the door!"

"When did you see him come here last?" McCarty asked.

"On the afternoon of Wednesday, but a half hour before he cry out for help from the conservatory where Lucette dies!" He spread out his small fat hands in an expressive gesture. "I think it is to this room that he comes for I am in mine with the door a little open and he pass quickly and without sound, going up the stairs. He carries something round and blue on the end of a stick and I think that I must be mistake' for it appears like the toy balloon of a child! Nevertheless I watch and in a so short time, a few minutes, he comes down again, still carrying the balloon. I tell of it to Ching Lee later but he has not seen it in the conservatory and he does not believe."

"Look here, Ching Lee, why didn't you tell somebody what you knew?" McCarty addressed the Chinaman who stood aside, silent and seemingly impassive. "Why did you let Orbit go on with his crimes when a word to us would have put him where he could do no more harm?"

"Mr. Orbit is rich, of a great family and power in high places, and—he is a white man." Ching Lee responded in his unemotional sing-song tones. "I too am of high degree and not without honor in my own land but I was forced to leave it and here I am a poor man, a servant without friends or influence—and I am yellow. Who would believe my word against his when I had no proof? I would have been cast into your prison but even there Mr. Orbit would have reached me and silenced my tongue. There was the little Fu Moy to consider, my nephew who is to be educated and go back with much to teach my people; I could not leave him without protection. I

could only wait for you, who are white men, too, to see what lay before your eyes."

"There's something in that!" McCarty conceded. "Isn't that the bell? If it's the men we've sent for bring them right up."

"It is possible that he have shoot himself before we arrive here," remarked Jean. "There is a pistol which he keeps always in a drawer of the little table beside his bed and to-day when he thrust me aside at the door of the cardroom to rush out and learn why all those men with shovels have come I feel it in his hip pocket as he pushes his way past. It is loaded always; that I know, for more than once I have looked at it."

Dennis glanced questioningly at McCarty who shook his head.

"He's taking his body with him where he's gone," he reminded the other in an undertone. "He'll not do that with the shot of a gun!"

Ching Lee reappeared with the two experts armed with tools and bags. After a cursory examination of the steel door one of the latter turned to the inspector.

"Can't be done in less than an hour unless we take a chance and blow it off, and you said there might be explosives behind it that would wreck the block," he announced. "I don't promise to do it in that time but we'll work as fast as we can."

"Let's go and have a look at that diary in the meantime," suggested McCarty. "Jean thinks there are more doors beyond like this one and it may be night before they're open! The boys can let us know when they've got through."

"All right." The inspector turned, addressing the two officials. "Want to come along? If it really is his diary,

it ought to be about the strangest document that ever fell into the hands of the department."

With a few minor directions to the rest he led the way back to the sitting-room and closed the door. The air was now quite clear of smoke and only a faint, noisome odor lingered behind.

McCarty seated himself in the chair lately occupied by Orbit himself and drew out the last drawer of the desk. It was filled with open envelopes bearing cancelled stamps and he scattered them on the floor in his haste to empty it.

"He told the truth about the false bottom," he announced. "I can feel it give but I wonder how does it open?"

One of the officials stepped forward.

"Shall I try, Mac?" he asked. "I was a custom house inspector years ago and there isn't a smuggler's dodge I'm not on to; that either lifts or slides and there may be a spring."

"Go to it," McCarty acquiesced briefly, and the other complied.

"Look here, Mac!" The inspector looked up suddenly. "Who chloroformed Orbit the other night?"

McCarty chuckled.

"He did, himself! I got that the minute I saw the bottle, for there wasn't enough gone from it to put a kitten out! The towel was soaked, but with water, and he'd just sprinkled enough choloroform on it to smell. He didn't want to lose his wits, you see, only to make us think he was unconscious so he could get a line on what we were after and hear our talk. He must have heard us coming up the stairs and looked out or else doped out that it would be us, for it was Denny and me that broke

in that night. He paid me a return call the next and rigged up a gun to shoot me in the dark, but I found it first and fired it through the roof!"

"'Twas that I heard!" Dennis exclaimed. "Glory be! Well I knew you were too old a hand to let it go off accidental, like you told me, but little I thought you'd been near murdered, or I'd not have left you, duty or no duty—!"

"There you are!" The detective lieutenant rose from his knees with the false bottom of the drawer in his hand. "It was a new one on me after all, but I managed to work it. There's a lot of papers underneath that look as though they'd been torn from a blankbook and they're covered with writing."

"It's Orbit's!" McCarty gathered the loose sheets up and spread them on the desk before him. "Do you mind when he wrote that list for me here in this very room, of the guests he'd had during the last few months? The writing is the same, and 'tis dated; it looks like the diary, all right! Do you want to read it, inspector? I'm not much good at it, and if he uses as big words as he talks with—!"

Inspector Druet took the pages from him and seated himself near the window. For a long moment he sat silent glancing over the papers and as he read his face darkened and then paled. Then with a sudden start he looked over to McCarty.

"My God, this is frightful! The man was the greatest wretch that ever lived! He must have been mad, of course, but listen! This is dated the thirteenth; that would be a week ago last Monday.—'I succeeded in making it to-day from the formula and tried it on the white kitten from next door. The result was amazing! If it

had been known a few years ago the history of the war would have been changed! If I could only experiment with it on a human, what a magnificent way it would be for me to learn the thrill of that last experience that awaits me! To take the place of providence, to play at fate, to make destiny! The longing haunts me, I cannot rest, I must know that ultimate sensation of power! I can't use the gas, though; I don't need to see the death I bring about and it must come far from the house. It will have to be the Calabar bean after all, but whom shall I choose? Not André, his soufflées are admirable, and Jean is the only servant who ever dusted my room and left things where I could find them; not Fu Moy or Ching Lee, for one never knows with these silent, yellow people when revenge will come. Hughes' services are invaluable to me but he is a dead loss to society, it might even be benefited by his removal. I must decide!'"

"That was it!" McCarty nodded. "The longing for power, to feel that he was the biggest man in the world; ambition with a warped turn to it! 'Twas nothing but the lust of killing born in him that he wouldn't admit even to himself!—But go on, sir. What's the next?"

"Two days later, the fifteenth; that was Wednesday. He says: 'It must be Hughes. The neighbors are still amusing after their fashion and I could not be sure they would go outside of the Mall immediately. Physostigmine is soluble in alcohol; I could put a grain or two in wine and leave it about but that will not do. I must give it to Hughes with my own hand. I shall have to await my opportunity, then give him a drink and send him on an errand to a strange part of town. I cannot wait!'—That's all of that entry and the next one is midnight after the murder.—'It is done! Hughes is dead and I

have killed him! I could shout, sing, dance as wildly as a savage about a pyre and yet I am strangely calm, like a god! I am a god, for I hold the power of life and death, I know what it is at last! The only drawback was that it was too easy; Hughes has been dissipating lately and it gave me an idea to-night. I mixed some bitters together with a dash of absinthe—just enough for one dose—added two grains of the powdered bean and put it in an old tonic bottle. When Hughes came to lay out my things for dinner I told him he looked badly, needed more air and exercise and persuaded him to go out and take a long walk, breathing deeply. Then I gave him the drink I had prepared,—poured it out for him myself and watched it pass with a gurgle down his gross, fat neck! I looked at him when he put down the glass and could not realize that it was actually accomplished! The man standing there before me was a dead man even though he still moved and talked and probably thought of his dinner, and it was I who had done this! It had rested in my hands whether he should live or die and I had condemned and executed him! I shall never forget that moment of exquisite exhilaration, the ecstasy of omnipotence! But I was discreet, I controlled myself. I warned Hughes that the medicine might make him feel a trifle ill, might even restrict his breathing but he must walk it off and he would be greatly benefited. He actually thanked me—thanked me for bringing death upon him! All the evening while Goddard and the Sloanes were here, I kept my triumph to myself but nothing could withstand my sense of power. My bridge was unsurpassed—I knew that—and I played the organ as I never have played before!—And then it came, that for which I had been

waiting. Three blockheads from the police arrived to tell me of Hughes' death!' "

McCarty chuckled grimly.

"Fu Moy overheard that conversation and told me about it only to-day—between Orbit and Hughes, I mean, about the medicine. He don't say anything about the fire after, does he?"

Dennis looked up quickly as the inspector glanced ahead and nodded:

"Here it is.—'There was only one flaw in this magic evening. I used the powdered bean from the smaller box and it was just enough. I did not open the other, forgetting how long it had been since its contents had been exposed to the air, but thrust it down in a seam of the cushioned chair and almost immediately after I had gone downstairs spontaneous combustion occurred.' "

"What-t!" Dennis sat forward tensely, and McCarty chuckled again.

"I tried to read you that about Calabar bean in that article we had at the fire house yesterday afternoon but you wouldn't listen!" he said. "I didn't know what was this spontaneous combustion at all, till you happened to explain this morning, little thinking what was on my mind! . . . But what else does Orbit say about it?"

"He goes on: 'Fu Moy discovered it and Ching Lee put it out. Fortunately they did not find the box of Calabar bean.'—He raves on again about his feeling of power, glorying in it, but that is all." The inspector slipped the page aside and glanced at the next. "This is dated Sunday, the nineteenth. 'The police were active yesterday but they are quite at sea. I have no fear that they will discover anything, although the one called McCarty seems to be possessed of a certain amount of na-

tive shrewdness and logic. No uproarious comedy has ever been so excruciatingly amusing as this investigation but I am maintaining my pose of regretful employer of a worthy servant. I only wish that I could have used the gas; I made a fresh supply to-day only to be compelled to dissipate it unused. It is maddening! The death of Hughes has not satisfied this craving but intensified it. Death by violence, death that I may experience the sensation of having caused it, while it is taking place—I hunger for it!'"

The shadows were lengthening in the room and the cries of the mob outside the gates had subsided to a sullen murmur. In the moment of silence that followed the inspector's reading of the paragraph, soft, slippered feet padded along the hall and Ching Lee stood before them.

"The door has been opened," he announced. "There is a second steel one behind it, even stronger than the first, but the men are trying a different acid and drill."

"Very well, Ching Lee. Turn on the lights, will you?" The inspector motioned toward the switch and in an instant the room was flooded with a brilliant glow from the low lamps scattered all about. "Tell the men to be as quick as they can, and let me know when they have finished; no one is to enter that room until we come."

The butler bowed and turning went up the stairs again. McCarty eyed the papers still remaining in the inspector's hands.

"Is there any entry in the diary for Monday?"

"Only this, but it means a lot, considering what came later: 'Ching Lee reminded me that the coal has not been ordered this season. The dust from it is horrible, defiling my flowers and soiling everything. I shall not arrange for it until frost has come. Yet there is some-

thing fascinating, relentless, about the way it rushes down the chute like a miniature, sable avalanche. If we were pigmies, what death it could deal!'—Oh, there's no doubt about it, Mac; the man is unquestionably mad!"

"His ancestors weren't; not all of them, at any rate!" McCarty responded grimly. "If the next that he's written is on Tuesday night, it'll be after Horace was killed."

"It is!" Inspector Druet's voice shook with loathing. "This is the most damnable thing, Mac! He must have sat in that very chair where you are now, gloating over it as he wrote!—'Once more I have usurped the prerogative of providence! I have taken a useless, sickly life, foredoomed to failure because it lacked the stamina to combat difficulties. Weakness! the only sin in the world! Had Horace Goddard lived he would have profaned art with mediocrity and as I look at the masterpieces about me I rejoice that his poor efforts are destined never to see the light,—destined because I so willed it, I am destiny! It was the luminal that put the thought into my mind, although I had no idea then whom I should remove. I forgot I possessed any till I looked over the store in my laboratory this morning. Two grains of that innocent looking coal tar product would bring oblivion in twenty minutes and the coma would last for two or three hours, during which time death might be brought about in a dozen different ways! I played with the thought, it fascinated me, and I could fix my mind on nothing else, although Giambattista was coming to play this afternoon. If I could only know once more those intoxicating moments of last Friday night!

" 'It was, then, just after lunch, that Horace slipped over to ask if he might study my Fragonard for a little

while. He came by way of the side door and none of the servants had seen him. I realized this and as I looked at him it came to me what a really unnecessary life his was, except in the fatuous eyes of his parents! What a subject for that coal tar product—and then I thought of the coal itself, that Ching Lee had spoken about yesterday. How easy it would be to render Horace insensible and bury him under an avalanche of coal!

" 'I could not resist the idea, it took possession of me! I coaxed the boy up to my sitting-room, induced him to drink a glass of milk in which I dropped two miraculous grains of luminal, and then I went and telephoned the coal-dealer. If he could not deliver, the boy would wake none the worse and my plan would only be deferred, but the order went through and when I rejoined him Horace was already drowsy. I shall never forget the exquisite agony of suspense during that half-hour. Horace slept at last and although I had to call the coal-dealer twice more my plan succeeded! I carried Horace to the cellar unseen and just in time, for the coal arrived and the crash of it tumbling down the chute was like the roll of maddening drums! To hear it was enough, I did not want to see, and I was again in my sitting-room spraying the black dust from my flowers when the man McCarty and his associate were ushered in. I am not quite sure about McCarty; I have not underrated him, he is the type of the one-time policeman, elemental, phlegmatic, devoted to routine and without initiative, and yet he seemed to-day to be studying me!' "

"He had me right!" McCarty grinned. " 'Twas what I went there for!"

"And me thinking you were stalling, and not getting it at all!" Dennis shook his head. "He'd a grand opin-

ion of himself, all right, but a poorly-read one of you, Mac!"

"Orbit goes on to mention Trafford's call to inquire for Horace while you were here." The inspector had been reading ahead. "Then he starts on to rave about the musicale and how he felt with the lad's body under his very feet; he says that at the organ he surpassed Giambattista on the violin and he was drunk with what he had pulled off all the evening."

"He played all by himself later," McCarty observed. "A funny, childish little tune and yet with something threatening and malicious about it, and whilst Denny was getting shaved this morning I found out what it was —a witch's song from an opera called 'Hansel and Gretel,' after the crone has lured children to her house and made away with them! That ought to have told me something if I'd known what it was!"

"He says nothing of planning another murder, does he?" Dennis asked. "He must have run wild when he committed one the very next day—!"

"The laboratory is open now, sir." Ching Lee had reappeared so noiselessly that he seemed to have sprung into being on the threshold. "No one is there."

"No one!" The inspector started up with a cry, cramming the papers into his pocket. "My God, he has escaped, after all!"

"I don't think so, sir," McCarty demurred gravely. "Perhaps the men didn't see him, but—we'd better lose no time!"

They sprang up the stairs and passed the two great steel doors swinging idly on twisted hinges, into a long, low room, looking very much as Jean had described it. The closed cupboards below the shelving were too small

to have held a human body and there was no other hiding place nor any way of egress save the door by which they had entered.

"We've been done, Mac!" the inspector exclaimed again, ruefully. "Unless the boys outside caught him, we'll have a long chase on our hands!"

"No." McCarty stood looking up meditatively at the huge circular vat which occupied the center of the floor and rose for six or seven feet like a miniature gas tank. "Give me that step-ladder, will you, Denny? I want to see is this empty."

"By the smell of it, it's not!" Dennis commented. "'Tis worse than asafœtida!"

He brought the ladder and McCarty ascended cautiously and peered over the top. The vat appeared to be almost filled with some thick, murky liquid with an oily film floating on the surface. When he had stared down into it for some minutes he descended, his ruddy face pale and tinged with greenish shadows.

"Mac!" Dennis caught him solicitously as he reeled. "It's sick you are! Come away out of this! Orbit's not here!"

"If I'm sick it's from my own thoughts, Denny!" McCarty replied shakily. "Where does that pipe lead to from the bottom of the vat?"

"To that huge receptacle over there." It was the detective lieutenant who answered, pointing. "It's to draw off whatever might be in there, I guess."

"Turn the cock, then, will you?" McCarty sat down suddenly and held his head in his hands. "I want to see the bottom of that vat!"

The inspector looked startled and Dennis stared but they made no comment and one official mounted the

ladder while the other turned the cock. There was a gurgle and then a swishing rush as the liquid poured into the slender, solid pipe.

"It's going down," the man on the ladder announced. "Whatever this greasy stuff is, it's slipping through the pipe, all right! What do you think is at the bottom of it, Mac?"

"I'm not wanting to think of it till I have to!" McCarty groaned. "Sing out if—if it stops running out before the vat's empty."

But the official did not "sing out" and the waiting seemed interminable. At last, after the longest half-hour that any of them had known, he announced:

"Vat's quite empty, Mac! Except for scum it's as clean as the floor! There's six little things that look like pebbles rolling around in it, though; shall I climb down and get them?"

"For heaven's sake, no!" McCarty sprang to his feet. "'Tis sudden death and a horrible one, if you so much as touch the stuff that's left there! Go and ask André for a lead spoon from the kitchen, and mind it's lead!"

The man obeyed and McCarty threw off his coat, climbed the ladder, and perched on the rim of the vat, while Dennis uttered agonized warnings from below. Then he drew up the ladder, planted it firmly inside the vat and when the detective returned with the required spoon he descended carefully to the lowest rung and scooped up the six gray pellets from the slime of the bottom.

When he had climbed over and down once more, guarding his find with the utmost caution the others gathered around him and he shuddered as he addressed the inspector.

"That vat is lined with lead, sir; nothing else but lead could hold that stuff for it eats everything away as if it hadn't even been! You notice that ladder was purposely fixed with lead tips to the feet of it or it would have melted under me! I've heard of it but I never saw it before. It's hydrofluoric acid. 'Twill go through steel and rock and—and flesh and bone, and leave no sign! Do you get me?"

"I do, but it's horrible!" The inspector shivered. "You mean that Orbit—! Was that what he meant by 'annihilation'?"

McCarty nodded.

"You'll mind there's only one thing can resist it and that's lead. This is all that is left of Henry Orbit—the six bullets from his revolver!"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE ADVICE OF EX-ROUNDSMAN MC CARTY

"SHALL we go on?" the inspector asked. It was nearly midnight and the intervening time since that dreadful twilight hour in the laboratory had been taken up with the formalities necessarily resultant upon the final tragedy. He, McCarty and Dennis were alone in Orbit's sitting-room once more, for the two other officials had returned to headquarters. As he spoke he took from his pocket the remaining pages of the diary.

"That's what Orbit wanted," McCarty replied in a subdued tone. "He's left the soul of him, such as it was, in those papers and though 'tis not a thing I'd like to let loose on the world, we know the worst of him and we ought to know the rest."

Dennis was still benumbed from the successive shocks of the day. He said nothing but his eyes, as the inspector sorted the papers, followed the movements of his hands in awed fascination.

" 'Wednesday night.' " The other settled himself to read. " 'For the third time in a week I have taken life, but the reaction is not the same. The mental exhilaration came but the thrill is gone, or rather it has changed into another sensation I have never known before. Is it fear? I honestly do not know. To-day I finished generating the gas for the third time and then, sure that I had the formula by heart, I destroyed it so that my knowledge

should be absolute, mine alone. The longing for a worthwhile experiment with it became an obsession and in actual agony, torment, I seated myself at the organ to seek peace.

" 'But for the first time music brought no relief to my mind and I felt stifling. I went to one of the windows to open it, and saw the French maid, Lucette, from next door, with little Maude Bellamy. The child had a new blue balloon and the thought came to me that if it were filled with the poison gas and they were in a closed room—! I invited them in to hear the organ and gave Maude some candy. As I had hoped she forgot her toy and dropped it. I picked it up and excused myself for a moment—only a moment, just long enough to hasten to my laboratory, deflate the balloon and fill it again with the gas.

" 'When I returned to the conservatory Lucette and the baby were still occupied with the candy. I handed the balloon to the child and then seated myself once more before the organ. Handel's "Largo" came to me and how I played! The thought that at any instant that toy might burst tingled in my brain and I found myself listening for it, tortured with suspense because it did not come. I stole a glance at my guests finally. They were seated side by side on the marble bench with the towering cactus just behind them, its spikes reaching out over their shoulders. If the balloon were to float toward one of them, if a breath of air should waft it against one of those gigantic thorns, as the child was holding it now, straight up into the air—!

" 'A louder, almost crescendo movement came just then in the music and I touched the swell pedal with my foot, urging the keys beneath my fingers. The shutters of

the swell-box were forced open, the current of air rushed out with the swift volume of sound. But rising even above that glorious harmony there came a sudden, sharp report! I dared not cease playing lest others in the house might have heard it, I did not even dare to look around. Never has the "Largo" seemed so interminable, but at last, just as I came to the end, I heard—the patter of Maude's feet! The baby had escaped me!

" 'I whirled around then and saw her playing about several feet away but Lucette was lying back dead, the remnants of the balloon at her feet! I rushed then to open the windows that the deadly vapors might not hang upon the air to betray me and after the room was quite clear of them I raised the alarm.

" 'McCarty and his associate were passing and in supreme confidence I had them called in, glorifying in their mystification. But the balloon disappeared! After the doctor and the medical examiner's assistant had gone, after the body had been removed and the baby sent home the balloon was missing and somehow I feel, I know that McCarty has it! That he suspects!

" 'Sir Philip has come but he is writing an important letter and I have taken the time to jot this down. I am going out. I have McCarty's address. I must know!

" 'Later. McCarty did have the balloon. He and his associate went out leaving the entrance door unlatched and one of the keys I took with me fitted the door of his apartment. I found the remnant of the balloon and brought it home, but that is of comparatively little importance now. With the knowledge that he actually suspects, this strange, new sensation came to me. Before, mine was the supreme power, I killed at will, but now I must kill to save myself! From being master I am be-

come slave—but slave of what?—I shall have use once more for that key!' "

"Sure, he did!" McCarty nodded. "I told you about the revolver waiting for me on a pulley the next night, but I'd like to know how ever he got hold of a police positive!"

"He tells that on the next page," the inspector remarked. "Here it is: 'I have just laid a trap for him in his rooms and he will blunder into it, but it has cost me the service revolver I picked up in one of my solitary walks down on the East Side, when a young policeman had been killed by gangsters and the body just removed. There is a retributive justice about my work to-night, for last night McCarty and his associate broke in here. I pretended to chloroform myself, hoping to hear from their conversation why they had come and how strong were their suspicions against me, but the man McCarty opened my windows and hurried his associate away. Can he have realized my ruse?

" 'I am afraid, I know it now, but not of McCarty personally. Individual to individual he is infinitely my inferior and yet there is about him a suggestion of strength which takes from me my sense of power. Is it because of what he represents? I am above the law and beyond its reach, but is it because he stands for the law, for the cumulative will of society, that my own will seems almost puny?' "

"Grand words!" McCarty grunted. "He was getting cold feet, that's what! He'd let his craze for murder run away with him, after all, and then lost his nerve when he found he wasn't putting it over!"

"I don't know about that, Mac!" Dennis shook his head. "Any guy that can plan such a finish for himself as he did don't lack nerve, even if he was such a cold-blooded,

black-hearted devil! I'm thinking he guessed right; it was the fear of the law, of every man's hand being against him, that made him put his back to the wall!"

"There's just one more entry," the inspector observed. "That one was dated Thursday and this one is Friday, the twenty-fourth."

"That'll be yesterday, or rather last night. Let's have it, inspector!"

"Well.—'I have failed! This morning, alive and unharmed, McCarty came to the Mall! I cannot hurt him, I am powerless against him, he is the Law! But, for the man himself, I have underrated him; he is more shrewd and clever than I thought. To-day he came to me and in Sir Philip's presence, with infinite tact, he let me know that he is aware it was I who made that attempt upon his life. Seemingly he holds no grudge; it is apparently a mere part of the game. He claims to have detected the odor of cigar smoke which I left behind me in his rooms, just as his associate smelled the smoke of that little blaze generated from the physostigmine. He gave me to understand, also, that he knew of my trick with the chloroform, and he lied most unnecessarily about minor details, with the full knowledge that I was aware of the truth. To-night he appeared again with utterly trivial questions and it is all too evident now that he is indeed studying me, making up his mind.

" 'I have a peculiar, indescribable feeling, almost a conviction, that he will win out in this contest between us! If he does, I shall know what to do; from this hour I shall be prepared. I am the last of my line and for such a line there can be but one end,—annihilation! I am possessed with an odd desire that he should read these pages and if he wins I shall arrange to have them pass into his

hands. It grows late and I am tired. I wonder what to-morrow will bring?'—That is all, Mac. That is the last word!"

"Well, he knows now!" McCarty drew a deep breath. "I'm glad that's over! It's going to take me all my time to forget these last ten days, I can tell you!"

"There's more than one thing that's not clear to me yet," Dennis remarked reflectively. "For instance, Mac, you said Hughes had been took sick sudden. I heard nothing about it."

"You did, Denny, the same as me, only you didn't get it. All the other servants told of how greedy he was starting in with his dinner, and how all of a sudden he didn't want any more, not even the things he was most partial to; 'twas the Calabar bean first working in him, making him sick. He got out into the air and walked like he'd been told, poor devil, till he dropped in his tracks! But he knew the truth in the end! Do you mind the horror I saw in his face and how hard he tried to speak and tell me?"

"But what really made you suspect the truth, Mac?" the inspector asked. "Was it the toy balloon?"

"Partly. Then again, when Ching Lee called us into the conservatory with Lucette lying there dead, it seemed to me that Orbit was a trifle too calm and collected, for all his fine-spoken words. He had his story down too pat and he didn't talk in short, jerky sentences, like a man does when he's almost beside himself; every word was said for effect, as if he was acting a part. He forgot it too quick, too. Even yesterday, when Sir Philip was talking about Lucette's death, he was more amused with the way the Britisher was trying to express himself, than

sorrowful over the murder, and the girl not two days cold!

"After I left him I went to a little joint to get a bite and whilst I waited I was feeling pretty rotten because I couldn't see my way clear like in the old days. It came over me that I'd been getting rusty since I was out of the game and I kind of wished I was back again, though I remember well what a dog's life it was in some ways. That is just the phrase that come in my mind, 'a dog's life'—and then I thought of Max!

"He was forever hovering around that coal chute as if there was something down there he wanted—then I remembered the coal getting put in, and the lad missing right at that hour, and the whole thing broke over me!"

"But you said you'd had the key to it all right in your hands from the start!" Dennis objected.

"I had. It was this!" McCarty reached in his pocket and drew forth a thin pamphlet bound in blue paper. "You've both kidded me about reading up on this psychology stuff, to try to keep up with the boys down at headquarters, but it was getting to me and I wanted everything I could lay my hands on that seemed to have any bearing on it. The first night, when we came here to let Orbit know his valet was dead, I found this behind some other books downstairs in the library and I—borrowed it. It turned out to be nothing at all but the history of a family, like a kind of a sermon on heredity, and I saw it had been published in London. I began to read it, wondering why Orbit would be interested in it, and I never heard the like of such a crew! From sheep-stealing to assassinating crowned heads, there was nothing they didn't go in for, and I'd say that not one in ten generations died in

their beds! They were a rare old family, the Jessups!"

"'Jessups!'" the inspector repeated. "Why, they're the family I spoke about this morning, though I couldn't recall the name!—the ones that are contrasted with the grand record of the Parsons."

"Sure, they are!" McCarty grinned. Then his face sobered. "I knew it then, for I'd put in good time in the library on Thursday looking them both up, but I didn't mention it because Orbit himself is the last of the Jessups."

"Orbit—!"

"His grandmother on his mother's side was the daughter of old Gideon Jessups who was hung down South for highway robbery and murder; another of his daughters died insane and two of his sons were convicts —but there's no use going into it all. You'll mind you said the male members of the line died out long ago, but it happens that no record was kept of the female side of the house except this little book here. I'm going to tell Parsons in the morning, for he'll not spread such a thing, and there's something I want to know. If there's any sense at all to this heredity notion, it don't look as if Henry Orbit stood much of a chance!"

* * * * * * *

"I can scarcely believe it yet, gentlemen!" Benjamin Parsons exclaimed. "The news that Henry Orbit had committed suicide in some mysterious manner, leaving a written confession, came like a thunderclap but now that you tell me the blood of the Jessups flows in his veins it explains many things!"

"Did you ever meet Orbit, Mr. Parsons?" McCarty asked. "Ever talk to him?"

"Once. It was two years ago but the experience,

though trivial in itself, was so curiously unpleasant that it has never passed completely from my mind." He paused, glancing toward the window through which the sunshine was pouring and listening to the not-far-distant chiming of church bells. "I came home very late from an evening meeting of a charitable organization. It was raining in torrents, I had forgotten my key to the gates and the watchman was standing in the shelter of a doorway far down the block; I could not attract his attention and I was drenched. All at once some one came up behind me, said: 'Allow me, Mr. Parsons!' and opened the gate for me. I was surprised, for the voice was unknown to me, but in the light of the street lamp I recognized Henry Orbit.

"You are familiar with his appearance, you have heard his voice, felt the magnetism of his personality and its dominance; did you feel also that strange sense of antagonism that is almost physical, as though you shrank from his touch, dreaded to breathe the same air?"

"I can't say I have, Mr. Parsons," the inspector replied thoughtfully. "As though he were a reptile, something poisonous, you mean? No, until yesterday I thought Orbit was a fine man. He had me buffaloed."

"I mean as though he were the incarnation of all things evil!" Parsons' voice was very low. "I did not gain that impression at first so strongly, but I felt a curious repugnance toward him in spite of the charm of his manner. He walked down the block with me, taking it for granted that his company was welcome and I responded as cordially as I could, for he had just rendered me a service.

"When we were opposite my own house I paused, thanking him once more for his kindness, and started

to take leave of him, when he astounded and distressed me by asking me to come into his house for a little while. He said that he was lonely, a saddened mood was upon him and he would greatly appreciate it if I could spare him half an hour.

"I could not very well refuse, but it was with a reluctance wholly out of proportion that I accepted his invitation. His house, although comparatively small, was beautiful beyond any palaces I have seen abroad and filled with priceless works of art but without any tangible reason my aversion deepened to actual horror. A tall Chinese servant had taken my hat and Henry Orbit led me to his library, pressing refreshments on me and talking fluently and well on a variety of topics. I endeavored to listen, to reply pleasantly, but all the time my uncharitable, unreasoning loathing of him increased and I longed, as I have never longed for anything else in this world, to be out in the storm once more—anywhere, away from that house!

"I am sure this must sound like madness to you, but I cannot explain it even to myself. I only know that my horror deepened as the moments passed and at last I did an unpardonable thing! I rose in the middle of a sentence from him and without a word of explanation or excuse I—I fled the house! I cannot yet describe the motive which actuated me, nor could I then have found any reason for it beyond an overmastering impulse. I have never known such a feeling against a stranger before in all my life!"

"You went out into the storm, Mr. Parsons—without your hat?" McCarty asked suddenly. The inspector smothered a half audible exclamation and Dennis stared.

"I really forget—but I must have done so, of course, for I distinctly remember the cold rain beating down upon my bare head as I crossed the street, and being most grateful for it."

"Then you left your hat hanging up in Orbit's house," McCarty pursued. "Can you recall what it was like, Mr. Parsons? Could it have been a soft, dark felt?"

"Probably. I seldom wear any other." Then Parsons started slightly. "You don't mean—! Could it really have been my hat, after all, that the unfortunate valet was wearing when he fell dead!"

"It looks that way, since your initials were in it," McCarty added: "That was the final detail we had not cleared up."

"But why, sir!" Dennis found his voice. "Why did you feel that way towards Orbit? He took in everybody else in the world!"

"I'm thinking I've got the answer to that, though it may sound like blarney saying it to your face, Mr. Parsons. We know who your family are and their record. 'Tis one to be proud of!"

"It is one to be thankful for," Mr. Parsons replied modestly. "But I should like to hear your theory."

"Well, we know who the Jessups were, too, and 'tis my opinion that the good in you for which you're not responsible, and the evil in him which he couldn't help, just sort of recognized each other at once and what you call your instinct warned you to get away."

"It may be." Mr. Parsons eyed him wonderingly. "I think you have grasped it, Mr. McCarty; the good and evil that men do live after them! I know it seemed to me that satanic vapors were rising all about me in that house and that I was in the presence of a monster! It

never even occurred to me to make excuses for my conduct or send for my hat!"

"There's just one thing that I'm curious about, though it has nothing to do with the murders. Have you missed this? It was with your papers when they came into our hands." He produced the silver leaf and Parsons' face lighted up.

"Ah, that is the bookmark I slipped between the pages of my encyclopædia! I told you that a leaf was torn from it! I am glad, indeed, to regain this, for it is a souvenir from a dear friend, an English army officer then stationed in South Africa—"

"It comes from Table Mountain, don't it, off of a silver tree?" McCarty smiled also as he rose. "Mr. Parsons, we'll be keeping you no longer. The trouble's been laid for all time here in the Mall, I'm thinking, and there'll be no more evil come out of that house over the way."

"And you three have brought peace to us again in a miraculous manner!" Mr. Parsons held out his hand. "Without you and the providence which led you to the truth I shudder to think what further horrors might have been visited upon us!"

"I don't know about providence!" McCarty's eyes twinkled. "I'm no hand at giving advice as a general thing but if I was to offer a word of it to you, sir, 'twould be this:—in future, be mighty careful where you hang your hat!"

THE END

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